Writers Unblocked

The best student creative writing 2009-2010

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Purdue University Calumet
Department of English and Philosophy

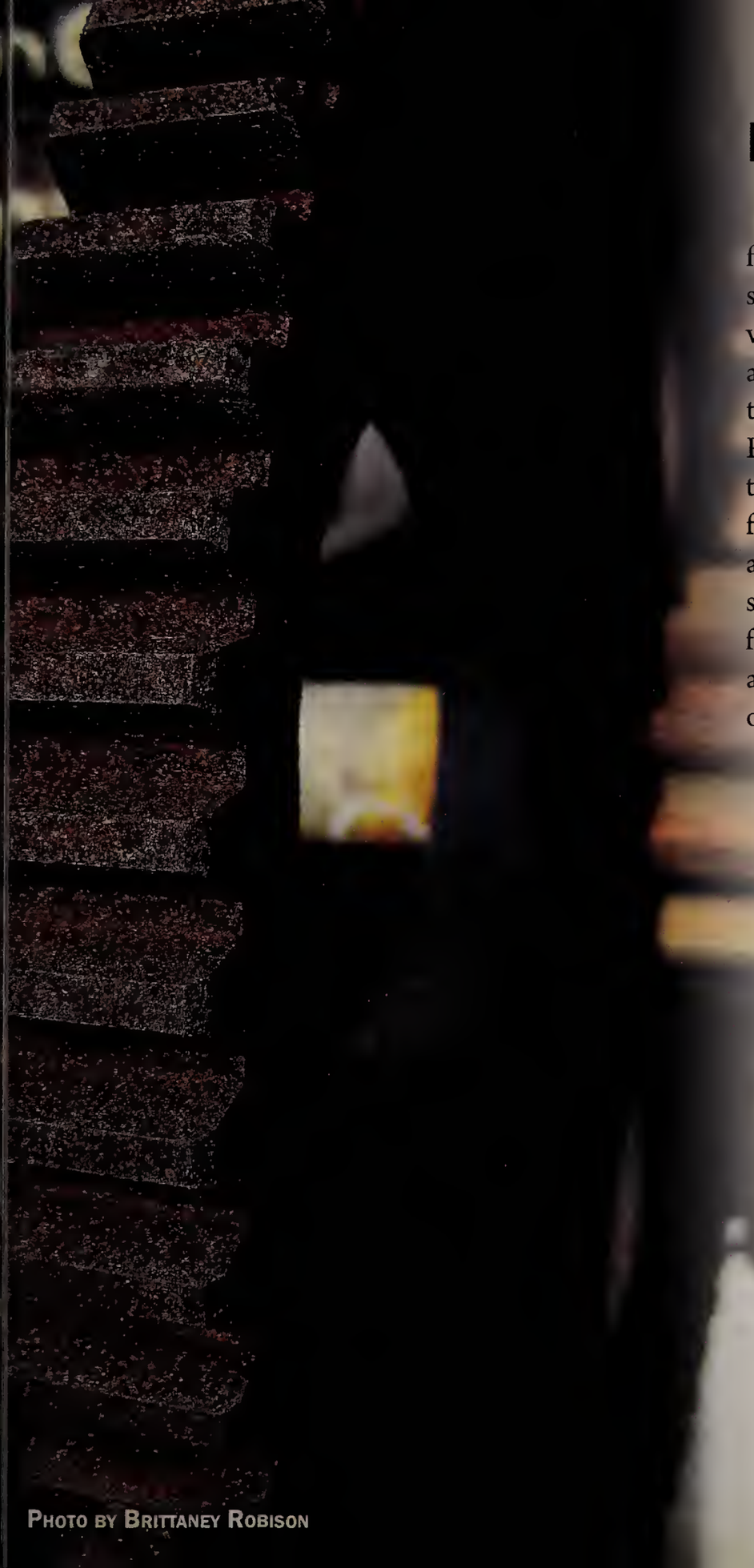

Photo by Brittaney Robison

Message from the Instructors

Writers Unblocked is the fourth edition of poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction from creative writing students at Purdue University Calumet. As in previous volumes, all work is written by students enrolled in creative writing classes. We are especially pleased this year to feature photography from students in Professor Tom Roach's Location Photography class. We are proud of the creative accomplishments of our students, and grateful to the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, and to the Department of English and Philosophy for supporting this journal. Thanks especially to Dan Dunn, former Dean of LASS, for establishing *Writers Unblocked* as a School priority, and to John Rowan, Interim Dean of LASS, for continuing that support.

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Photo by Morgan Walker

Blinders

Dune Lorenz

Cars speed by going over 60 miles per hour, most blurring by past 70. I am one of them.

As fast as I'm going, I don't take the express way much. It's unfamiliar territory and I'm glancing nervously at my directions every few minutes. I'm not exactly sure what I'm expecting to show that briefly. "Turn right. Smash through the sound-proofed walls like the Hulk. Hope for the best. 1.6 miles."

The day makes it seem worth speeding blindly towards the mall. I might be tired, but the sky is so blue and the Sun so blazingly fierce that I make sure to pry my eyes open fully. I don't even bother with sunglasses, because I want to absorb every bit of it.

Traffic is kind enough to allow distance for me to appreciate these details without getting into an accident and it gets to the point where I'm glancing at the sky almost as much as I'm glancing at my directions.

I can't help it. I look up, I see blue and yellow rays, I smile. I look up. Blue and yellow. Smile. Throw some good noise from the radio with my hands mimicking the same noise on the steering wheel, and pretty soon I'm grinning.

Carpe Noctem. Seize the night. Or in this case, the day.

Blurs of cars go by so fast that I can't make out their colors, so I just focus on the same. Blue. Yellow. Smile. Grin. Blue. Yellow. Smile. Grin. Red?

Red overflowing my left. Flooding. Suddenly, I can't look up at the sun or the now crimson sky and I wonder what the Hell is going on. My left eye goes black and I wonder if my car got hit.

No, I can just barely see the road. Blood red. No accident yet. Thank God. Cars are honking and zig-zagging blurrily as I creep my car to the side with its blinking hazards, trying not to panic.

I flip down the visor mirror and nearly throw up in shock. The red is my now glassy-looking eye, oozing red from the inside socket with no pupil left in sight for my already wavering visibility to notice.

The other eye ain't looking too pretty, either, but it's there.

I grab my cellular phone with my shaking hand, while my brain struggles to figure out my next move. I don't call 911. I call a girl. A girl who is very, very long distance and happens to be my tell-all. I also kind of have a crush on her. So when I'm sitting here going blind, the choice seems more comforting than some emergency operator telling me to calm down.

"Hey, Pepper? It's Wallace. Hope I'm not bothering you. I'm a little shaken up."

"You okay? You sound really freaked out."

"I'm going blind or my eyes are exploding or something. I don't know. There's blood everywhere and I'm having an anxiety attack."

"Oh, Gosh. Is there anything I can do?"

She never said God. I thought that was cute and comforting. At least I knew one of us was watching our backs properly.

"Just talk to me, you know? Maybe call an ambulance once I calm down. That's enough."

"What happened?"

"I don't even know, Pepper. One minute I'm driving on the road, the next my eyes are puddles of blood. I'm scared, hun."

Hun. I didn't care. We sent signals for weeks now, over the Facebook and the Twitter. Doubt it was any sort of surprise to her or myself.

"Everything's going to be alright okay? No matter what."

"How will I talk to you?"

"I'll call, sweetie. We'll get together or something. I'm not going to leave you in the dark."

"Thank you."

"Just do me a favor, okay?"

"What is it?"

"Don't look into the sun."

The End

Photo by Brittaney Robison

The Busy Life

Aimee Adams

Alex sat at the kitchen table with her trigonometry book open, papers spread out, and pencil in hand. She twirled it back and forth between her finger tips. At least she appeared to be busy, but the reality was that she couldn't concentrate. She couldn't even get past the first equation on the page. Thirty minutes passed and the sound of the kitchen clock seemed to get louder by the second. Every tick-tock brought her closer to the fact that mom would be home any minute.

Her mother was known for her conservative values in the community, and sat on the Board of Trustees for many local agencies. She helped at warming shelters, volunteered at nursing homes and served as children's minister at their church. She was the wife of Pastor Robert Jones, in one of the largest churches in the area. Together, Robert and Rachel Jones were well known figures in their community. Alex felt her mother's busyness was like a contagious disease. Eventually, Alex had it, too.

She was a 17-year-old senior in the Honors Club at school. Even though she excelled in math and science, she loved music and theatre. She auditioned for the school musical and got a main part. She was active in the Science Club, Speech and Debate team, and sang in Swing Choir. She also participated in the youth group on Wednesday nights, at her parent's church as time permitted. Alex didn't enjoy the youth group, but felt obligated to attend. At least her busyness helped her to avoid her parent's busyness, and the loneliness she sometimes felt.

She also had a boyfriend. David was in college and he claimed to love her. Lately, she wasn't so sure. At one time, she thought she loved him. Now her feelings were changing. Her bright red phone, set to vibrate, buzzed on the table. A text message from David read, "Appointment set for Friday. Trust me. I'll be with you for it all. I love you." She laughed. If he really loved me; he'd realize "all" started right now! Today! Alex's hand gently rubbed her belly as she thought, "Why wasn't he here? He should be here if he loves me."

Since it was Monday, and that meant staff meeting day at the church office, she knew her mother would be home by 4:00pm, and it was now 4:08pm. The tension was unbearable. Alex was keeping a life-altering secret, and she wanted to tell the truth. The secret was getting heavier by the day, and she knew her mother would be disappointed in her. A smug feeling of satisfaction crept up inside Alex's heart at the thought of her mother's disappointment. This feeling troubled her just as much as the secret she was hiding. She looked out the kitchen's sliding glass door just in time to see her mother's car pull up in the driveway. Alex's

palms began to sweat. She thought to act normal, and help bring in groceries, so she headed out the sliding glass door.

"Hello Alex," said mom. She leaned over from the trunk of the car, and kissed her daughter on the forehead. "How was school today?" Mom handed Alex two stuffed grocery bags from the trunk, then picked up one more, and a gallon of milk. With long brown hair worn down to their shoulders, both mom and daughter looked like twins as they marched back into the house.

Alex answered, "It was good, the usual."

"Don't you have play practice tonight?"

"Not tonight, tomorrow night, right after school." She hesitated, then said, "And for the rest of the week."

"I guess I got your schedule confused," said Mom.

They placed their bags of groceries on the kitchen counter. Mom's keys made a loud scraping sound when she placed them next to the bags. Alex began to put groceries away. First the eggs, which were on top, then she put away the milk.

"So I worked on the lessons for Sunday School, and started arranging the children's Christmas play. Oh, and Mrs. Williams' had surgery today, so I'm going to take food to their family tonight. Please leave that frozen lasagna out and the garlic bread, too. Would you like to go with me?"

"No. That's not my thing," Alex said. The bags were empty now and she folded them and put them in the utility closet. She went back to the table, to her book and papers, and felt exhausted by the whirlwind of her mother. The moment hadn't presented itself yet and she feared that she wouldn't get the chance to talk to her mother at all. Her palms were sweaty again, and she rubbed her palms on the legs of her jeans.

Rachel said, "This is going to be a busy week. Tomorrow, I have a board meeting for the children's clinic. There's a regional prayer meeting for other church mom's from the area on Wednesday, and we're holding a big meeting on Thursday to plan for Friday's march."

She was barely listening to her mother's familiar tirade. Hearing how busy mom was reminded Alex how little time she had for anybody else, especially Alex. She was sipping on a glass of juice when she heard the words "Friday's march." The juice sprayed out of her mouth, dampening her unfinished homework.

"Friday's march?" asked Alex.

"Honey, are you ok? Be careful. You shouldn't drink so fast. Here's a towel." She continued, "The Mom's Coalition just found out that the County Wellness Clinic has scheduled an abortion this Friday." Alex stood frozen. Her heart was pounding. She couldn't move, she couldn't think. She didn't know what to say or do next.

Her mother continued, "We're staging a peaceful march to let the clinic know we're watching them. One of our sources says they have an underage teen scheduled. Her parents have no idea what's going on. Our community needs to

know what's happening here."

Just then, Alex's red cell phone vibrated on the table. David sent a text: "How's it going with your mom? Haven't heard from you. Getting worried!" Alex rolled her eyes and shook her head. She could strangle him for not being here for this and she felt like she could throw up.

"Was that David?" asked Rachel. "Don't forget we have a limit each month on text messages."

Alex grew agitated and sharply said, "I don't text too much!"

"I'm just saying to be careful of what your texting. Don't get upset dear."

"Easy for you to say," Alex said softly.

Rachel spoke, "Alex is something wrong? Are you alright?"

"No I'm not alright, mom. Nothing is alright." Alex felt like a volcano was erupting inside of her. "I'm surprised you noticed at all?"

Rachel stopped what she was doing and looked quizzically at Alex.

"Call off the march, mom. Don't march on Friday."

"I didn't realize you felt so strongly about this."

"How would you know how I feel? You're too busy to know how I feel about anything."

"Alex, we've talked about this before. If you need me, I'll make time for you."

"So you'll pencil me in? Your own daughter has to be penciled in? That's just great!"

Rachel raised her voice to Alex, "Alexis Jones what is the matter with you. I've taught you better than to speak to me like this."

"You've taught me better in many ways, but I still managed to mess it up."

"What are you talking about," Rachel asked.

"I'm pregnant, mom! That's what I'm talking about. I've wanted to talk to you about this for days. I'm the underage teen scheduled at the clinic on Friday. You and dad are the parents who don't know what's happening to their own daughter. You'd be the ones who are way too busy with everyone else's life to notice anything that's happening in mine!" When Alex realized she had blurted out everything in a fit of rage, she started to cry and couldn't stop. She ran out of the kitchen, and sat down on the patio chair. Her palms were still sweaty, and she continued to cry.

Rachel was in a state of shock and she couldn't speak. She was still processing the words, "I'm pregnant." She followed her daughter out the sliding glass doors and sat down next to her on the patio.

"I've wanted to tell you, but there was never a good time. You are always so busy."

"My busyness didn't make your pregnant, your choices did," said Rachel in a calm voice. "Is David the father?"

"Yes. I don't think he wants to be," Alex sobbed. "With the way he's been acting, I don't even think I want to be with him anymore. He wants me to have an abortion. I don't want to, but I don't want to have a baby either. There's no easy way out. What am I going to do?"

Rachel didn't have any answers; she was stunned. She could only manage to open up her arms and hold her daughter close, while together they cried. "We'll find a way to get through this," Rachel said.

Alex felt anger creeping up in her throat. She looked at her mother and asked, "How are we going to get through this? There wasn't a we before I got pregnant. You never have time for me."

Rachel said, "Alex, please…."

"You don't understand. I don't fit in at your church; I don't fit in here at home. I don't like taking food to sick people, and angry people forming protest marches scare me. Is that what God is all about?"

Rachel wasn't prepared to answer her daughter's question.

"If I have this baby, my life is going to change. I know it. But your life is going to change too."

"Oh, I realize that, dear," Rachel spoke sarcastically.

"All your board members, and protesting friends, what will they say when they find out that your daughter is pregnant? What will they say when they find out the teen they're marching for Friday is me?"

"I don't know, Alex."

"What will the church board say to Dad? Will they ask him to step down as pastor? What about college? How can I go to college with a baby? I'm ruining everything for everybody. Even though I don't want to, I wonder if having the abortion is the only solution."

Rachel looked at her, grasped her hands and said, "Having an abortion won't solve any problems, it will only create new ones."

Sitting on the patio, they stared at each other, in the cool evening air. Each one could see the heart break in the other's eyes. They had no words to say. Alex wondered how she was going to tell her father. The thought of his disappointment didn't please her at all, she only felt terribly guilty.

Rachel broke the silence. "Your father will be home soon. I'm going to start dinner for us and ask someone else to take food to the Williams' tonight. I'll have to make a phone call."

Alex watched her mother get up and enter the kitchen once again. She reached for the phone, sat down at the kitchen table, and began to cry. Alex realized this was just the beginning of a painful journey which she had created. Her phone vibrated, this time in her pocket. David wrote: "Is everything ok? Really worried now? I love you." She glanced through the glass door to see her mother crying at the kitchen table. Her present reality was more than she knew how to cope with. Alex stood up. She dropped her cell phone on the patio chair, and walked down the driveway, to the street. The trees formed a canopy of fall colors above her head. She decided to walk. The wind picked up, swirling fallen leaves of yellow, orange, and crimson around her feet. New leaves fell in front and behind her. Every step made a noisy crunch. She kept walking, and didn't look back.

The End

Compacting Negative Spaces

Jessica Price

Twenty five years, seven months, and thirteen days threatened to crush the one thing Adam Tristan had ever allowed into his life.

This wasn't a blank symbol, an empty lyric to encompass a mediocre life. No, it was far more shallow (or perhaps complex) than that. Adam didn't wake every morning to a world of metaphors and analogies, didn't crack a puzzle wonderland of poetic genius, wasn't exploring stanzas for a formula to the deep meaning of life. Sometimes, he felt like screaming in his less giving moments, sometimes a tree was just a tree. Life was just life: no more, plenty less. There wasn't always a double meaning. There weren't always lines to read between. The superficial didn't necessarily give way to an abyss of abstract genius.

Right now, of course, Adam's lips were too dry for yelling, for hourly sermons on word syntax and unhidden metaphors. The corners of his mouth cracked in the space between subtext and reality.

Twenty five years, seven months, and thirteen days—it wasn't some inscription, some witty message, or a prepaid calling card to the Great Beyond. Though it was, in the basest sense, a ticking of all the seconds he'd never get back, the stacking of each event in his life in one uneven row. This stream of disjointed consciousness was his life. Those numerical adjectives—twenty five years, seven months, and thirteen days— those petty numbers were his age. Simplified linguistic rules were all he genuinely was, every insignificant moment of it, stretching beyond conventional carrying capacity, somewhere between satire and novella.

The threat to crush was neither exaggeration nor emotionally driven. And it wasn't Adam who would be crushed, too thickened with proximity. Skyscrapers of magazines, of cardboard boxes with baby clothes, of newspapers with (un)interesting articles cut and pasted on walls which dipped inward, this claustrophobic setting encased Adam in a verbose cocoon, a warm nook of nouns away from the roaring abyss of verbs outside. An entire metropolis of twenty five years, seven months, and thirteen days of memories, photos, gutted notebooks, yearbooks, woven baskets, all of it morphing into an anthropology, a thesaurus of sorts. Mound upon mound upon mound of clean laundry, unfolded, (dresser not incapacitated but nonexistent) streamed the kitchen table, legs kicked out, a flat surface on the carpet—all of this reaffirmed Adam's sense of gravity, while piles of glass figurines, the eyes gouged out with love, stood atop his clothing and greeted him with saccharine smiles.

This was his living room. This was his life. And it could, quite literally, in fact, crush Tyler at any moment, years worth of sentimentality swaying

back and forth, tipsy with precarity.

Tyler—the boyish man with blue green eyes, hazel eyelashes flitting over cheekbones accentuated with freckle-small moles (or mole-large freckles)—could be crippled any moment in this pit Adam called home. Crippled, paralyzed, shattered into fine dust and nestling upon the coarser dust of the once-white carpet. A steam cleaner would never purify the fabric back to its move-in value ivory.

He was the only thing Adam had ever allowed into his life, and even then it hadn't truly been allowance on Adam's part, but force on Ty's. He was the only one capable of outweighing twenty five years, seven months, and thirteen days (Adam's English degree dictated this as a form of "irony", considering Tyler's insubstantial size, the circular joints of his wrists visible through the worn sleeves of oversized Goodwill jackets); he with auburn hair and unapologetic laughter, who lead parades on the glint of a nicotine-laced smile, who wept during off-Broadway love stories played at dinner theaters with the lights not quite dimmed enough, who dumbed down to stereotypes before turning everything back around with snippy commentary.

Tyler Briggs, his name truly the only appropriate definition, sentence fragment or not. Adam didn't know how else to describe him; how could he articulate the curve of his neck to someone without sight, the jingle of his giddy chatter to someone without hearing, the hazelnut-tobacco aura preceding him to someone with no nose? He was just Tyler Briggs. Soon to be Dr. Tyler Briggs.

And soon to be… no, already Adam's happily ever after, or the closest thing he could get to a fairy tale in the fallen paradise of Middle America. Leave it to the English major to be less poetic and more cliché than the man crushing a path through med school.

Crushing a path through medical school and crushing a path through Adam's life. Tyler didn't disarm; he dismembered. Removed every organ, every tendon, stripped the layers of skin back to yellowed bone, leaving no form of covering as the marrow froze, before rising to a steady boil. He shredded Adam and drew a thank you in their kisses—sucked gratitude away in the same self-assured, wholly symmetrical methodology he scrawled anatomy notes, the way he doodled in the margins while highlighting words which meant nothing to Adam, obliterating the theory of superior vocabulary in the Language Arts department.

"What about this?" Tyler's fingers, ink stained and skin raw, clutched a black hefty bag, half filled (or half empty), while his off-brand Payless sneaker kicked an unmarked cardboard box. The lid shuddered open, a folded party hat flipping before landing atop a pile of papers.

New Years, 2007. Three years, two months, and seventeen days ago.

Adam's memories dripped from the sagging lid. His second New Years with Tyler, not here, of course, but in the dorm room of the type of university a lowly English major had no resources to cope with. There existed no words to justify him

being in this setting, without factoring in his status with Tyler. And even then the dorm room, with its steel appliances and antiquated countertops, wasn't truly Tyler's sanctuary either, not a speck of the interior design, or even the prominent odor of Slim Jims, his own. Not the sports memorabilia or the empty protein shake cans aligning the trash dispenser, instead the monastery of a roommate Adam would never meet.

New Years, '07. The power had died at 11:57:09 PM and hadn't returned until the next year, until 3:07:52 AM.

He didn't know if they'd managed to lock lips when the ball dropped, at precisely midnight. What he did know was Ty tasted like Nicorette gum (fresh off the study of the lungs) and sparkling grape juice (the liver as well) and resolutions Adam wouldn't get around to for three years, two months, and seventeen days.

He didn't know if they'd kissed at midnight, but he did know that he couldn't have written it better, couldn't have novelized it without trivializing it, without gratuitously abusing adverbs and purple prose. He wouldn't have changed the snow drifts outside the dorm window or the flicker of lights just before they blipped off, wouldn't have changed the startled squeak Tyler had made upon revelation that the power was indeed gone, that they had no source of light outside of each other (and really, romantic symbolism wouldn't ensure that the backup generator would turn on).

There wasn't much Adam would change, in the end. He was more historian than writer.

"Don't you know what that is?"

Adam didn't say that three years, two months, and seventeen days ago, nor did he say it now, with Tyler clutching a black bag of Adam's amputated life, the plastic bulging forward like a swollen cadaver's face found in a drainage ditch.

He didn't say anything. If Adam wrote the scene, composed it for some junior level composition course, maybe then he could dictate it better, but in the end, surgeons remove and writers create. This was Tyler's area of expertise.

He didn't hate him for it, but Adam didn't exactly glorify it at this moment, either.

"Baby, what do you want to do with this?" Tyler's voice was eternally gentle, face just as smooth and carefree as it always was, but the pet name grated at Adam's spine, skin prickling at the clichéd nature, at the stereotypes his boyfriend emitted.

"Keep it," Adam said, glancing at the floor, at a pile of term papers he'd completed several years earlier. No. Not several. That was too vague and too akin to hyperbole. Three years ago, more than a couple but less than several, far less than several.

"But it's just… why?" His voice didn't raise, at least no more than usual, still bordering soprano. Not feminine soprano, but childish, pre-pubescent.

"Don't you know what that is?" He could say it now, stepping closer, an accent to their height difference, to the five inches Adam had over Tyler. Five inches in height, sixty pounds in weight,

Adam was not a delicate boy, not a beautiful boy, not lyrical in the slightest. He didn't need lyricism to prove that he was too big and too gawky, too much of too many things to fully express them, and it killed him that his boyfriend had all the poetry in their relationship, while he himself had nothing. Tyler didn't need poetry. His idea of poetic was Jonathan Larson, the score of Rent, so many clichés and stereotypes, just another musical-humming queen who happened to have all the clarity of Wordsworth, Keats, Eliot, Chaucer, Shakespeare in the simplicity of his smile.

"It's garbage," Tyler's eyes flicked up to meet Adam's, not narrowed, but wide, his eyelashes dark and contrary. How could eyes be both warm and cold simultaneously? Why did he have to be an oxymoron on top of everything else?

"It's not garbage! It's… don't you know what it is?" Adam bent down, grabbing the party hat, flexing the cardboard in fingers closer to sausages than spider's legs, his own nails unchewed but yellowed from work, from working 9 to 5 at a butcher's shop, lifting carcasses while his English degree smoldered, all while Tyler learned the subtleties of the human heart.

"It *is* garbage, sweetie. Look at it, it's broken."

The elastic band dangled from the hat, Adam's fingertips gracing over it in memory. He'd snapped it in their kiss, pulled at it so eagerly it had broken, smacked Tyler in the face and left a welt.

"It's not broken," Adam hugged it to his chest, stepping away from Tyler, shaking his head.

"What's the worst that could happen if you threw it out, huh? We need to make room—"

"*WE* don't need to make anything. *You* need to respect *my* space."

His space. Adam's space. He'd never be able to make room for Tyler, no matter how many boxes were thrown away, no matter how much debris scraped into the corners, paving a walkway to the vital rooms of the apartment.

"Adam…" Such a cliché, an overly emotional cliché, Tyler's face heating at the cheeks for just an instant before paling, eyes falling down as the first tears collected at the corners of teal eyes. "Do you…"

"Do I what?"

He didn't speak, and Adam would never know what it was he'd planned on saying. But he didn't storm off either, the lack of dramatic tension overshadowing Adam's concerns. "Do I what, Tyler? What?"

"Nothing, just forget about it."

"You always do this. I told you about… I told you my house… you knew my house was like this! You knew!"

"I know. Or, well, maybe I didn't know. But I do now."

The hat crushed against Adam's chest, his heart racing as he stepped closer to Tyler, grabbed his chin and tilted it to look at him, squeezing his mandible until he swore he heard it pop. No, it was the air pressure, making Adam's ears pop. Tyler's lips flooded pink, parted at the center as he looked up.

"I didn't have to do this," Adam crushed the party hat in one hand, careful not to crush Tyler's face in the other.

"I know." Tyler held a hand to Adam's chest, pushing him away. "You're right. It's your house, isn't it? And what right do I have to dictate what you do with your things?" His skin was red where Adam had grabbed him. Five little fingerprints, four in a line, one solo, glowing vermillion on his china flesh. "I guess I didn't know what it was after all. Keep it."

"Where are you going?" Adam called after Tyler had already left the room. His words clung to the papers surrounding him, staining the landscape with dialogue.

"Ty? Where are you going?" Feet crunched into the paper trails, the laundry, the grime and empty fullness, as he pushed boxes out of the way, trying to intercept.

Tyler's hair swished behind his head as he stepped out the door, no glance back, no dramatic last words, no closure of any sort as he left. Adam didn't chase after him, let him walk down the hall, his footsteps not skipping, not swaying, his usual soundtrack sucked away by the world. The cardboard of the blue hat cracked in his hand, Adam walking to the empty wastebasket and discarding it. The plastic sack swallowed it, while the rest of the apartment swallowed twenty five years, seven months, and thirteen days.

The End

Photo by Erin Doherty

The Dark Side of Love

Timothy Hurtt

The headlights spray through the gaps of the bedroom curtains as she lies there fidgeting on their bed. They flash upon her and pass faster than her youth. Each beam duller than the last, fading away like her vision of the future. This has become a nightly ritual, watching and waiting. Anxiety develops into irritation. As the minutes move like seconds, tears of concern become drops of rage.

She grabs her cell phone and dials George, and the call goes straight to his voicemail. Hoping that he was trying to call her at the same time and their calls cancelled out, she quickly gave it another shot. Once again there was no answer. It was now clear that he was not trying to call her too; he was avoiding any calls from her. Rita was not worried that something bad had happened to George because he has done this many times before; her only thoughts were of what he was doing. As the voicemail prompted her to leave a message, Rita's mind was flooded with possible responses to his absence. The phone beeped, it was time to speak. Dead silence filled the air, knowing that there was limited time to speak she rushed and vented her anger "where the hell are you George? Do you have any idea what time it is? We need to talk." But she was done talking; those were the last words she ever wanted to waste on him.

For a few months now she has felt this way, stuck in a trap, this house was no longer a home. Each day the blade digs deeper, cutting away at her soul. Thoughts of the perfect confrontation grow hazy as the anger builds a wall in her brain. "Why doesn't he love me the way he used to" is the eternal theme in Rita's mind.

Emotional waves began to slam upon the shores of her soul. "How could everything unfold so quickly, I had it all figured out, from day one until our caskets were closed." She had expected there to be bumps along the road, just never a thought that they would drop into such a massive pothole.

As she sits alone waiting for the door to open and to feel the warmth of George's arms an eerie touch of the past confines her soul.

It's Christmas Eve and Rita is impatiently waiting by the front door. "Mommy, when is my dad gonna be here? I wanna see my daddy."

Her mom hastily replies, "He should be here any minute!"

Totally ignoring her mother's response "But, but I have to see him before Santa gets here, and," now beginning to get teary, "and you said Santa isn't coming if I'm not sleeping by 10 o'clock, and look at the time mommy, it's almost 9."

The clock faded away as Rita sat there saddened by her fathers' absence, and what felt like ten minutes of waiting for him to show up at the door, had turned into ten years.

She frequently dreams of how that night could have turned out. The same thoughts disturb her, 'I could have convinced him to stay; oh, how he would have adored me in my red velvet Christmas dress. The innocent smile plastered on my face usually brightened the dimmest of rooms.' Now all she has is a memory, a mere vision of all the Christmas lights blended together in a blur, magnified by tears.

Rita needed a man in her life, but the only one she knew walked out on her when she was 8 years old. Being with George was the only way she could suppress her dark history but the decision was final, Rita was not going to endure the agony anymore. She put pen to paper and composed her feelings to George.

You will no longer emotionally abuse me; I am not one of your toys. I know what you have been doing, I have known for a long time. It's over, everything is over. I know where you're at during the night, and your "business" trips—they were all a lie. I'm done, it's all over now. By the time you read this it will all be over, no more pain.

Rita

There is a faint squeak of the floorboard made by George as he sneaks in the back door. As he heads straight for the couch to sleep, which he has done so many times to deter Rita from knowing how late he really got home, he notices a piece of paper on the coffee table. He uses the dim light from his phone to read the script on the paper. It was a note from Rita, so he jumps up and turns the lamp on to get a better view. He cannot believe what he is reading, time stops and everything is silent, and in shock the letter slips away from his fingers.

George frantically begins to search the house, opening every door "Rita, Rita" then with no response he slams them shut. He opens the bedroom door and turns on the lamp and sees that the bed had been slept in. There was only one door left to open. In the bedroom was a large walk-in closet, the only space in the house that George was generous enough to let Rita have for her own use. Almost terrified to open the door, his palms are sweating and shaking like an earthquake. He slowly opens the door anticipating terror, flipping on the light switch in dismay. His heart stops, there it was-nothing, everything gone. The shoes, the clothes, the memories, had all vanished.

George quickly pulls out his phone to call Rita, but the battery is dead. He anxiously rummages through the mess that she left behind, looking for a charger. "Where the hell is the damn thing" he shouts as he carelessly tosses his things around the room. Finally he stumbles upon the cord and plugs it in. Instantly the phone powers up and "2 missed calls" flash across the screen. George flips open the phone and sees that the calls were from Rita and there was also a voicemail. With a sense of relief but still shaking nervously, he checks the message.

It was nearly dawn, and George was still searching for answers, his mind was in a weary state from a lack of sleep, but rest was far from

what he desired. Staring at his phone in hopes of a second chance, another call, or even a text message, he realizes that wherever Rita had gone she was probably sleeping by now. Before he puts the phone down George flips it open and dials Rita. There is a ring on the other side and he quickly hangs up. "Shit, why, what?" George didn't expect anything less than dead silence, no preparation for the call but pure angst and fury. After a deep breath to let out the aggression it was time for another attempt at salvation.

"Here it goes," George sadly mumbles as he makes the final call. Instantly Rita's voicemail answers, which he is more content with than conversing with her directly, avoiding any argument. "It takes a big man to admit he has a problem, and Rita, I had a problem. I was drunk for two straight years." He begins to talk faster as his nerves magnify. "I used to look for advice in the bottom of a bottle, and believe me I dug pretty deep. I finally found help, I have been sober for eight weeks now and I feel great, or at least I felt that way until tonight that is." Struggling to focus on the positive side, George cannot help but to think of how it felt when he walked in the house several minutes ago. "I used to feel, well, pretty much how I feel now, lonely and empty." The sorrow puts a burden on him; this is not something that a recovering alcoholic should be dealing with alone. "I never enjoyed lying to anyone, especially you, but I didn't want you to see the monster I became. I hid everything from you; the business meetings weren't business, I was getting help." In plain sight was a bottle of whiskey. It was a gift from George's boss, three years ago when he gave him a promotion. This was the promotion that finally encouraged him to propose to Rita. How could a gift turn into such a tragedy?

The End

The Dragon-Slayer

Stephen C. Lawrence

The hooves of my horse clack on the cement as I ride it down the snow covered hills outside the city of Nicomedia. The city is bustling with activity, as people go through the new capital of the Roman Empire. The cool winter air nips at my face and chews on my nose.

Behind me, marching in perfect sequence, are the men in my Legion; men that would bleed and die if I told them to without giving a reason. Of course being the legatus of the Legion brings me that type of honor. I signed the contract to be in the Roman army when I was sixteen—the appropriate age to sign up—to be in the army for at least twenty-five years. I, however, have served for thirty-four and I do not plan on retiring any time soon. At the age of twenty I was made a Legionary; at thirty a Centurion; at thirty-five a primus pilus and given a cohort; at forty, I was sent to the alae and also made a praefectus castrorum of the Legion. Soon after, when Diocletian was made the Emperor of Rome, he offered to make me a dux of a diocese. But I turned it down; I'm not cut out for politics. So he made me a praetor and then made me the legatus of the Legion.

I lead my men through the forum of the city, past the marketplace toward the northern end of town, where my men and I are called to. I have not been told why, and I am starting to feel apprehensive. The sky is dark; the air is silent; the houses and apartments each seem to be lit by a single candle, casting the insides in a hazy gold. The only thing that fills the air is the acrid stench of burnt meat from the sacrifices of the day.

Oh dear Lord no! There were sacrifices today and we are headed to the northern end of the city, where the new cathedral of Nicomedia is located. It had been spread throughout the Empire, from bishop to bishop, that the Christians is Nicomedia were building a great church, masked to be a giant house; many laughed at how the government was even helping to build it. And today, the Nicomedian Christians were celebrating the Christ Mass, even though it was December 28, not the 25th.

"Double time!" I tell my men.

We march down the winding streets when we come upon a building with a domed top. My stomach disappears and I know that is the church; there are troops and a pyre of fire outside. Some legionaries throw books and scrolls into the pyre, which devours them with malevolence. My heart breaks as I realize that they are gospels and epistles.

I hand the reins to the tribunus laticlavius and jump down to the ground. I undo the strap of my galea, take it off my head, and tuck it under my arm as I run my hand across my head to get rid of helmet hair. I walk up to the nearest legatus. He turns to me and I see that it is Aulus Pinarius Praetextus. I

have butted heads with the self-righteous ass once or twice before. For some reason he is always hostile around me, and I don't know why. If anything, I should be the hostile one; I've worked hard, bled and sweat my way to become a legatus, while he, being the patrician, has been thrust into the army and promoted nearly every month because of who his father is and because he knows the right people.

"Evening Georgius," he says as if he does not wish to see me.

"Evening," I say to him. "What is going on?"

"Have you not heard?" Pinarius asks me as he hands me a scroll. As I read, he tells me what it says. "Diocletian just passed this Edict: All those under Rome's rule must give sacrifices to the gods, or be put to death." He pauses as he looks back at the church. "Damn Christians seem to be the only ones holding out." He turns his head and spits. "Serves them right; all the craziness is because of them."

I have heard that said numerous times since I have been in the army. In the fifty years before Diocletian's reign, Rome has had twenty-eight emperors, not including the dozen or so that were not formally recognized by the Senate but were elevated because of the army. Chaos, not the emperor, reigned supreme for that half-century.

It was the only way that I could have been able to be a Christian and be in the army. I had joined, knowing full well that I would have to make sacrifices to the gods of Rome. That did not bother me so much; the Romans care not if you believe in the gods, just that you sacrifice to them. Mix that with the fact that, like my compatriots, I wished to find ways to end the chaos, being a Christian was not hard to hide. Many times I felt convicted, but I knew that God was gracious and loving and would forgive me.

The doors to the church open and a man with trimmed black hair and a light beard walks down the stairs toward us. "Pantaleon," Pinarius says to me. "Deacon of the church. Decided that Christianity's not worth dying for." To Pantaleon: "Well?"

Pantaleon shook his head. "They're all damned fools; they won't comply."

"Very well." To me: "Get your men ready." To the others: "Lock the fools in and burn the cursed place to the ground!"

"Wait!" I say as I grab him by the arm, not thinking. "You can't!"

"Why not? They won't comply, so death awaits them. That's what happens to traitors to Rome."

"But this is madness. Diocletian can't possibly be for this. He was supposed to end the madness, not add to it." I lower my voice. "Or do I need to remind you how Diocletian became Emperor?"

Diocletian came to power when Emperor Numerian had been fighting against the Persians. Numerian and his forces left and went traveling to Bithynia; one day, his soldiers smelt decaying flesh. They found Numerian dead and his prefect, Aber, broke the news in Nicomedia. The army saluted Diocletian as emperor—though against Aber's attempt to be saluted—and dressed him in the

imperial purple vestments. Diocletian swore that he had not responsibility in Numerian's death, then turned and blamed Aber for Numerian's death and killed him on the spot.

After that it was easy to take out Numerian's brother Carinus. The armies of the two met at Margus; Carinus, being quite unpopular with the Senate and his officers, was killed by his own men. Diocletian was then made Emperor of Rome by both eastern and western armies.

Little did anyone know that Diocletianus was responsible for Numerian's death; I should know, he asked me and Pinarius to kill him. Which we did. He said that he had ways to change the government and to end the chaos. But this… this is not anything he said.

"You know," Pinarius said as he leaned closer to me. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say that you're a Christian."

So here it is. For nearly thirty years I was very cautious of keeping my Christianity a secret. It was not that I was ashamed, heavens no. But had I not hid my faith, I would have been martyred before I finished training camp. And whenever I would cross myself, thinking a prayer to God, I would place the X on my head, but make it look as if I had an itch. And never once had I been forced to proclaim my faith. But can I do it now?

"Well," Pinarius said. "I'm waiting for an answer."

"Diocletian said that he would end the madness and bring order. But this is insanity and chaos."

"You're committing treason."

I turn my back, ending the discussion. "I'm sure Diocletian will believe you." I slip my galea back on my head and get onto my horse. "Either way, I wash my hands of all this."

As me and my men walk away, I try to consol myself. I tell myself that I did not say that I was a Christian, so I can still fight this from the inside; I tell myself that those that are dying as the church is burnt are going to a better life; I tell myself that there was nothing that I could have done, and that I did nothing wrong. But even I don't believe the latter part.

***

The next few months fly by in a haze of monotony. I slink through the days by training men in battle and then come home and drink myself into a stupor until I crash into a dreamless sleep. Then I wake up and do it all over again. My wife says that I look like a ghost, or a zombie; I think zombie is the better description.

It is not until March that things turn around. By brother, who is a priest, comes to me one day asks to have services in my house. The house is quite spacious and the triclinium has a lovely view to the garden. Once the couches were moved, then there would be plenty of room for the altar and the congregation.

Next thing I know, it is Lent. My brother, ever knowledgeable of politics and the constant persecution, constantly bring up men like St. Peter and St. Paul and other who had to live just like them

and he calls for all to change their ways, lest they die without being a part of Christ.

It is not until Lent is over that I begin to feel a pang of guilt for all that I've done. During liturgy the Third Antiphon is Christ's Beatitudes; the choir sings Christ's words "Blessed are you when men shall revile you, and shall persecute for My sake." And the Gospel reading contains the verse, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other." A warmth flows throughout my body, and my stomach dances in my belly like it does before a battle. It seems as if the Holy Spirit told me what I should do.

I ask my brother that I wish to be baptized the following week. He says, "Why wait? Let's us do it right now."

So the congregation walks the five miles to the nearest river. There I am reborn a new Georgius through the healing waters of baptism. Then, dripping wet, I am led back to the villa where I am chrismated into the Church.

The following day, we have a service in the early morning, where I receive the Divine Mysteries the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Epistle reading for that day comes from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is to gain… For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ." And the Gospel reading contains Christ's words, "Take up your Cross and follow me." I now know what the penitence for my life's sins is to be.

***

My horse barrels through city of Nicomedia toward Diocletian's palace. My heart throbs in my chest like a rabid animal trying to break from its cage. Sweat soaks my toga pulla and a line slinks down my face.

The palace is colossal. Tall white stone walls climb towards the sky while red clay tiles lay across the ceilings. Bright green bushes outline the exterior, while ivy slinks up it. Two guards stand at the gate of the outer wall. I have no plan, just a cause, as I hand my horse off to one of the servants and trek through the courtyard of the palace and come to the young legionary guarding the gate; he looks like he just signed up yesterday and barely made it through training.

I walk up to him and act like a general. "Take me to the Emperor."

The kid doesn't back down. "Who the hell are you that you think you can demand to see the Emperor?"

Before I can answer him his centurion, followed by the Praetorian Prefect, comes up to him and starts screaming. "Do you know who that is? That is General Georgius, a close personal friend of the Emperor. You do not question why he needs to see the Emperor; you just let him! You're lucky he's telling you what he's doing, for he does not need to if he does not wish to!"

The centurion turns to me, "Apologies General. Forgive this insolence." He waves me through.

I leave the soldiers as the centurion verbally abuses the legionary and am escorted by the Praetorian Prefect to the sun-filled palace courtroom and indoor garden. There is a light trickle of water as it flows out of a stone fountain of dolphins and waters

nymphs and was collected in the stone basin.

My breathing becomes ragged. I feel as if I'm going to fight a dragon or something… and I know I'm going to die. I look and I see sitting, talking with a few men and women—senators and their wives no doubt—Diocletianus, the Augustus of the East and Pontifex Maximus of Rome.

For all of his ungodly acts, Diocletian has brought the Empire from the brink of collapse. With the institution of the Tetrarchy he was able to have four men control the Empire and keep everything in line. I think it's just asking for trouble; give anyone a little power and they'll want more, and that's exactly what the Tetrarchy does.

Diocletian stands up and has a huge smile on his face as he sees me. He wears his golden leaved diadem with a purple toga, which has gems and gold sewn into it. His black, curly hair is cut short and his beard is trimmed.

The Praetorian Prefect prostrates himself on the floor. It was something that Diocletianus had mandated for everyone to do in the presence of one of the Tetrarchs. I am about to, but I catch myself; I do that for only one Man.

"Georgius!" Diocletian exclaims, though I can tell he is shocked. "What brings you here? Come, come," he says as he motions me to join him for wine.

"No, Your Excellency," I say. "I cannot. I am here to turn myself in."

"For what?"

"Treason."

"Treason? You?"

"Yes. I must admit that for far too long I have served two masters. I have only now just realized that I cannot serve two; for I will either hate one and love the other, or be loyal to one and despise the other." I pause to calm myself. "And I choose to hate and despise you."

All the servants stop what they were doing. The Praetorian Prefect looks at me, astonished. The room is dead silent. Diocletian, however, is calm, though keeping back his rage. "And who is your master?"

"He, like you O Great Emperor, is both king and High Priest of His Empire. But His is one that will never pass away. It is one that you could never conquer, even if you could find It. He is the only-begotten Son of the Almighty God, who was crucified, died and rose again. His name is Jesus Christ!"

Diocletian steps closer and whispers, "Georgius please do not do this. Do not throw all you—all we—have worked so hard for. Come now, recant what you said, make a sacrifice to Zeus for your insolence and I will forget everything you just said; I promise."

The soldier in me wants to obey, but I fight against it with every fiber of my being. "Nothing in this insignificant life can weaken my resolve to serve God."

He forces air through his nose in frustration. "Fine. Guards!" The guards run in and stand by his sides. "Take this cursed Christian to the dungeon. Tomorrow, we make an example of him."

***

The prison stinks of hay mixed with urine and dung—rat's and human's. The cold steel of the iron bar bites into my neck as the chains attached to it are bolted into the ground. The inside is like the outside: an inky black with cold air and bites me everywhere.

I'm scared. It was easy to hide it around Diocletian, but now I just want to cry myself to death. I have no idea what I was doing coming here to be martyred. I'm not like St. Stephen, St. Ignatius, St. Polycarp or St. Lawrence; I'm just a sinful idiot, that's lived a lie for a lifetime. I cannot do this. I've fought in so many battles, but those I knew I might die, but I would not go down with a fight. Now, I can't even fight back. I don't have the strength for this.

Fear not. For I will be with you, until the end of ages. And I will give you the strength to endure.

Warmth fills and calms my heart. I only feel peace, for I know where I will end up when I die; and pity for Diocletian and all those that will send me Home. I care not how they kill me or how long it will take. Nothing will get me to turn my back of Christ.

***

They take me from the prision cell before Diocletian and the people in the hippodrome the following morning. The crowd is screaming for my blood, which they all know they are going to get, by the buckets.

Diocletian stands at the Emperor's box at the very top. The sun shines off his diadem. His red toga glistens like the scales of a dragon; a dragon waiting to feast on my flesh. He has a fire in his eyes I've only seen once and that was at the death of a mortal enemy.

I am taken to a torture device which is a wooden wheel; a wooden rod hangs over it, with great big iron spikes protrude down, only a hands length from the wheel. They strip me naked.

Diocletian signals the mob to quiet.

"Last chance," Diocletian hisses, "Any last words?"

Courage fills me. "Only that you will tire of tormenting me sooner than I will tire of being tormented by you."

They strap me to the wheel and lower me toward the spikes. They spin the wheel.

Tearing flesh… scratched bones… ribbons of color… one riotous scream… splashing… flesh tearing… bile rising and exiting… vision swimming… black...

***

White fills the space in a milky haze. I know not what I am lying on; it feels solid, but also like there is nothing there at all. Singing fills the air and mixes with the scent of floral incense.

I look up and see a man in a red tunic with a blue mantle wrapped around his body. He has his hair pulled back and a thin beard hangs from his face. A golden crown adorns his head. Nail scars decorate His hands and feet.

Fear not, He tells me, *for I am with you. I am not done using you yet. He has no power of Death; but I do. And through your death, you shall be honored.*

And I shall be the one that honors you the most, My master and servant. Fear not, and continue to fight the Good Fight.

***

I awaken feeling sand cover my body. I turn and it sticks to my skin. I groan and my hand slaps the sand; a wet splash echoes in the hippodrome. Other than that, there is no other noise. I realize where I am and what just happened. I inhale and something liquid gurgles in my lungs; I spit it up and taste iron. Blood.

I stand up and look down. Red covers where I once lay, a huge puddle of blood mixed with my vomit, sprinkles the sand. My body is covered with lacerations and blood, but it is no longer flowing, and the cuts are only inches long.

Everyone—the soldiers, the senators, the mob—are in stunned silence. I know many of them have heard of my heroic exploits in battles. But none of them would have expected this. The soldiers snap out of it and rush me out to the Temple of Zeus.

Diocletian is exiting the Temple when we arrive. He is furious. He yells and screams and rants and raves and asks me questions of how I could have survived.

"My Emperor has more power than you do."

The dragon's face is red. He walks up to me, breathing his hot fire into my face. "Do you enjoy mocking me?"

"Only a little."

The fire in the dragon's eyes explodes. He leans back and exhales, the color draining from his face. He smiles. "Bring me some sandals."

We wait, and a soldier brings leather sandals. However, these also have metal spikes the size of a man's finger.

"Put them on him."

They set the sandals on the ground. As they come to grab me, I dodge them, go to the sandals and slam my feet into them. The spikes tear through my skin and shatter my feet; one tears my little toe off. Blood pools under my feet and pain course through my body; nothing to worry about though, I can endure.

Diocletian orders me to be buried alive. "Let us see him survive that."

They dig a hole in the dirt, enough for a man to fit, and toss me in. Just to make sure I suffer as I suffocated, they pour lime onto my body. My flesh melts, and the cuts in my body are lit on fire. My vision leaves me as dirt smacks my face as I lay in my grave.

***

I slowly start to awaken to the noise of muffled voices above me. I try to think of why I can't breathe, and then I remember that I was buried alive. Fingers scrap the dirt from my face which gives way to sunlight.

"Curses!"

I am torn out of my grave and my body crashes to the ground, and before the feet of Diocletian. The dragon huffs and puffs in anger. He turns his head. "Athanasius!"

An elder man in a black robe, long white

beard, and beady eyes sunken into his face comes forward.

"Deprive him of his magical powers," Diocletian demands.

I cannot help but chuckle. The sorcerer leaves and we wait. The lime is still burning off my skin as it feels like mice are gnawing at my feet from the inside out.

"How do you like your sandals?" Diocletian asks.

"They are just my size," I reply. That wipes the smile from his face.

The dragon paces back and forth as we wait for the sorcerer. Diocletian comes up to me and says, "One last chance. I'm giving you one last chance to denounce this idiocy, come to your senses and stop acting mad. Recant what you said, give a sacrifice and it'll all be over."

"What makes you think I would give in now? If I was as fickle as you're making me out to be, I would have given up long ago." I pause, think and then say. "How long have I been buried?"

Diocletian looks at me, hate in his eyes. "Two days."

Athanasius returns with two golden goblets. "One," he tells the Emperor, "Will strike him mute; the other will strike him dead." He holds out the goblets before me. "Pick your poison."

I grab both and mix them together in one. I drink it. The concoction causes my head to swim, but that is the worst of it. "Is that all you got? Can your gods and their concoctions not strike me dead?"

The dragon screams, his fire washing over me, "By what power are you still alive!"

"Do not imagine," I reply, "that it is any human learning which keeps me from being harmed. I am saved only by Christ and His Power. But here now, I grow tired of toying with you. You wish me dead and I wish to be gone from this world; I can tell you how to kill me."

Diocletianus looks as if he does not believe me, but asks, "How?"

"Allow me to die in an honorable manner and I will pray that my Lord will take my life from this world. For through his death and resurrection, He now controls death and has power over who lives and who dies. What do you have to lose?"

He thinks about it for a few moments. "Very well."

We return to the hippodrome. The people seem more anxious than before, but they don't yell or scream. They probably just want to see if I'm going to die this time. I get dressed and kneel down as the executioner sharpens his blade.

I look up and lock eyes with the dragon that's raged a war with me. Three times we have battled and three times he has lost. He knows he's lost; he knows that he's been slain. He might be the one that will be alive come tomorrow, but I am the victor. For I have fought the fight, and won the war. Now, I go home a victor to receive my crown.

The executioner swings his blade and I feel nothing…

But the peace of eternal life.

The End

The Ghosts of Fiction

Brian Lynch

Before I begin, I want you to know that I'm not crazy. Don't worry, I'm not offended. Madness was my first thought, too. There's simply no other explanation for why a man suddenly becomes haunted by fictional characters of his own design, but that is exactly what has happened.

My name is David Barton. I'm thirty seven years old, and until a year ago, I was a fiction writer. I've published dozens of books in a variety of genres. For years, I toiled in obscurity, receiving very little critical or commercial praise, until my sixth book *Parliament of Glass* exploded onto the bestseller list. I became a household name virtually overnight. In 2006, I was declared "The Best New Author of the Year,"despite the fact that my first book had been published nearly a decade prior. Since then I have received a multitude of awards and accolades. Two of my books have even been turned into feature films, and a third became a hit TV miniseries. At the height of my career, I was unstoppable. I could write for days on end without hesitation, and rarely if ever did the work need to be revised. It was as if some unseen muse sat perched on my shoulder, whispering dictations in my ear. I was an editors dream, and was paid very well for my talents.

I'm not sure when I lost the gift of storytelling. It was a gradual process, I suppose. At first, it was nothing more than failing to find the right words. Before long, I began to agonize over the structure of sentences. I would sit in front of my computer for hours, typing a few words and then deleting them again. I had never known such frustration. I was once an architect of words, and then I could barely string a coherent thought together. At least I could take solace in the fact that, while the work had become labored, I was still able to write. This continued for months, every sentence a battle, every page a war, until one day the words stopped coming altogether. For someone in my line of work, a blank screen is a death sentence.

It was then that I suffered what the media would later refer to as "an epic mental breakdown." I hurled my computer monitor out of my third story window, got drunker than I have ever been, and marched into my editors office. I threw her the seventeen pages I had managed to complete, gave her the finger, and told her I was done. That was the last time anyone in the professional world ever saw David Barton.

When I finally sobered up the next day and realized what I had done, a feeling of relief washed over me. I was free. Free from the deadlines and the scrutiny. Free from the editors and the press and the public. But most of all, free from that cold, hollow feeling in my stomach being unable to write had caused. I could go anywhere, do whatever I wanted.

I was no longer tethered to my work.

The first thing I decided to do was leave the city. I had moved there to be closer to my publisher, and despite the nice apartment I had found, I hated it. I was born upstate, and had never quite adjusted to the din of the city. I nearly went insane from insomnia my first week, and it was only with the aid of earplugs, and later a white-noise machine, that I have been able to get a decent night's sleep in this godforsaken city. And the people! God, how I'd grown tired of the people. Congesting the streets and shopfronts, getting in each others way with no regard for anyone but themselves. If anything was to blame for my current state, surely it was this city.

That night, I packed a bag and left my adopted home, determined never to return. I drove to a town about a hundred miles outside the city limits. I had stayed there a few times before, on the rare occasion I would allow myself a vacation, and always felt a tremendous amount of sadness whenever I would leave. It was a quiet place, seemingly untouched by time. There were shops and restaurants owned by people rather than corporations.

I had managed to save quite a bit of money from my days as a writer, and I knew I could live here quite comfortably for the rest of my life if wanted. I checked myself into a hotel for a few days while I began looking for someplace permanent to stay. Fortunately, I was able to rent a small house that overlooked a beautiful creek, and for only a fraction of what I paid for my apartment. I made arrangements to have my belongings shipped, and resolved to enjoy my early retirement.

The first few weeks of my new life passed quickly. I furnished my home, went for long walks in the park, and watched a lot of television. It had been ages since I watched anything on TV, and it was nice to be entertained by other people's work for a change. I was also sleeping better than I had in years. In a small town like this, the streets seemingly shut down at dusk. Some nights, I would go out on my front porch and just stare into the darkness, and listen to the gentle chirp of the crickets. I remember one particular night, a few days shy of my first month in town, when the sunset brought me to tears. I remember this night not because of the sunset or the emotions it stirred in me. I remember this night because it was when they began to come to me.

I had just turned off my bedside lamp and closed my eyes when I sensed the unmistakable feeling of being watched. I rolled onto my side and saw Veronica, a character from a children's book I had written early in my career, standing beside my bed. She looked exactly as she had in my mind, right down to freckles across the bridge of her nose. She stood with arms crossed, and the moonlight shining through the window painted her face, which was contorted with anger. She stood there for what felt like hours, glaring at me, her once innocent eyes judging me. Without saying a word she turned and exited the room. Slowly, I stood up and walked to the doorway. I wandered out into the living room, scanning it for any signs of my

phantom intruder, but there were none. I leaned against the wall, panting, only then realizing I had been holding my breath this whole time. I moved on unsteady legs back into my bedroom and shut the door. I sat for hours staring at the door, afraid to shut my eyes only to see Veronica's face when I opened them again. Eventually, I fell into an uneasy and dreamless slumber.

The next morning, I had convinced myself I imagined the whole thing. Surely, I couldn't have been visited by someone who never existed outside of a book. You can't be haunted by fiction. In the harsh light of day I shrugged off what had terrified me so completely the previous night. I got back to my life of leisure as if nothing had happened. It would be three weeks before I was visited again.

I had gone into town to get some groceries. It was an especially nice day, so I decided to walk. The sun felt good against my skin, and I recall being in a particularly good mood. The encounter three weeks prior had become a distant memory. I had finished my grocery shopping and decided to duck into the little bakery that was on my way home. I reached for the doorknob just as someone on the other side pulled open the door. It was Jake Donovan, the protagonist from *Parliament of Glass*. When I say it was him, I don't mean the actor who portrayed him in the film version. No, it *was* Jake, exactly as I had always pictured him. Like Veronica, Jake had a look of hatred on his face, his stare burning me to the core. He stood in the doorway of the bakery, barring my path, silently disapproving of my presence. He took a step toward me, and the next thing I remember is running. I had abandoned my bag of groceries and didn't stop running until I reached my house. I quickly locked all the doors and shut myself in my bedroom. That night sleep did not come. Whenever I would start to drift I was awakened by the sensation of being watched, though no one was in the room.

Convinced that I was hallucinating, I made an appointment with a neurologist the next morning. After running a battery of tests I was given a clean bill of health and sent on my way. I stopped at a coffee shop a few miles from my home to consider my next step. I was searching for psychologists on my phone when out of the corner of my eye I see a hand swat my cup of coffee to the floor. The the cup struck the tile floor with a dull thud, as it's steaming contents bathed my shoes and ankles. I instinctual jumped to my feet and found myself face to face with Dale and Ethan Callahan, two more of my creations. They stood with eyes transfixed on me, bearing the same look of hatred and disgust the others had shown. I rushed out of the shop, nearly knocking over an old woman as I fled.

When I arrived home I quickly became aware that someone had been there. The television had been turned to face the wall, and every magazine in the house was torn to shreds in a pile on the floor. Sitting on my coffee table was my laptop, which was opened to a blank word document. For the first time since my "haunting," I became angry. I threw my laptop against the wall, splitting it into two pieces.

I turned the television around and screamed to the empty room, "You all can go to Hell! I'm done with you!" Feeling vindicated I sat down on the couch and turned the TV on. Though I may have been done with my characters, they would make it clear that they were not done with me.

Afternoon turned to evening, and I had received no rebuttals for my outburst. I was partway through a rerun of *I Love Lucy* I had seen a dozen times before. It was the scene where Lucille Ball's character enters the room to plead with Desi Arnaz for a part in his big show. But instead of Lucy, Harriett Tyler, another one of my characters walked through the door. She walked over to Dezi and motioned for him to leave, which he quickly did. She then turned toward the camera, and edged closer to it, until all that was on screen was a close-up her hate-filled face. Unable to bear it any longer, I turned off the television, though I could still feel her eyes watching me from the other side of the screen.

From that night on, my characters followed me everywhere I went. Alexander Steele was standing by the bed when I woke up. Bill Mayer was waiting in the passenger seat when I went to leave for the store. Tiffany Duncan stood beside the cashier as I paid for my purchase. They were with me from morning to night, staring with hate in their eyes.

The last few days they have become increasingly aggressive. As I fall asleep, I can hear them whispering angrily. Yesterday, I returned home to find the contents of my refrigerator emptied on my bed. Earlier today, Shannon Worthington reached out and grabbed the steering wheel, nearly driving us into the path of an oncoming truck. I can hear them now as I sit locked in this closet, typing on an old typewriter I borrowed from a neighbor. I hope this story will appease them, if only for a little while. At least until I can figure out what to do next. I hope this will finally end my torment. One last tale to silence the ghosts of my imagination.

The End

A Haven for City Pests

Kimberly Lobherr

His rugged, grimy hands in fingerless gloves worked earnestly to pick the food from the slightly damp cardboard boxes stacked next to the dumpster. It was a duo of luck and skill that he got to the pile before anyone else—these people are animals. Arranged into his large, dingy, but reliable Hefty sack was an opened bag almost full of pretzels, some Oreos, trail mix, vanilla wafer cookies, and a small jar of Jiffy peanut butter, barely touched. Foraging on through the boxes, he tossed aside some inedible microwave popcorn, digging out three single serve applesauce containers, followed by mixed fruit. He took time to position them in his sack properly, so as not to disturb further a tear in one corner that had been patched with brown tape. Shifting the surface layer around where he assumed it was papers-deep, he gave a hearty chuckle upon discovering a few cans of Miller Lite situated at the base, and found room for them amidst the rest of his stash.

Morgan passes by this dumpster with his Hefty bag every morning during the migration from his alleyway setup off Ninth Street to his favorite spot in Paddington Park—where he can get a little "R & R," dead center in the city. But, rare is the day when he hits a jackpot of this magnitude, and he knew what to expect the moment he saw the cardboard towers beside the dumpster. He felt a twinge of sympathy, but not guilt. It's not stealing after all, and he didn't kill anyone. It's an old folks home, and people die. At least, that's most likely how all the food got put here; most of the expiration dates are still good. Determined not to take anything for granted, he opened up the dumpster lid. His chest full of air to avoid a direct whiff, he scanned the ever so familiar wet banana peels, crumpled up papers, soiled Depends, and other random dirty trash particles. The lid slammed shut. Nothing worth sifting through, given this morning's prosperous find.

In the mood for some reading in the park, Morgan revisited the large box of papers in hopes of finding an old newspaper. After reading it during the day he could tear and crumple it into his potato sack pillow, currently lying damp, back in his alley. He leaned his plastic bundle safely against his calf, and tossed aside opened envelopes, junk mail, and old bills. Morgan sighed; *don't these people know that you shred account information and social security numbers?* After a fruitless newspaper hunt, he settled on returning later to search for some better pillow filling, and headed toward his park.

His six and a half block walk to the park was a pleasant enough routine. The air still crisp would later be as warm as the eastern morning sky was amber. It's Saturday, and the sidewalks don't even begin to fill until closer to seven. Inside the bakery, a couple ordered coffee. They probably had an

early morning train out of the city, to catch some badly needed fresh air. The Seven-Eleven across the street was empty; the clerk outside swept crumbs off the stoop. Up ahead, a Labrador squatted beside the concrete on the only dew-covered patch of dirt available, while the owner—clad in jogging clothes—inhaled a breath full of nicotine. The usual type of crowd for the hour.

Morgan claimed his favorite bench, up on the grassy manmade hill, the best view overlooking the park's main attraction. Removing his brown and dusty tweed cap with his gloved left hand, massaging his curly, dark hair with the dirty fingernails of his right, Morgan took in fully the majestic experience of the Paddington Park Bird Refuge. Eyes closed, the breeze always blows cleaner here than anywhere else in the city. A sweet pine and berry fragrance replaces the industrialized mixture of exhaust and pastries. The melodic polyphony of robins and cardinals harmonizes with that of the morning doves and endangered loggerhead shrikes. A Bossa Nova percussion sounds, courtesy of a band of blue jays and a tiny downy woodpecker.

Squinting a little from the blaring sunrise, Morgan saw heaven's light shine down upon the haven. The spread of wood, a tropical oasis; acting as the sole source of life in a desert for miles around. Most every bird makes music in the trees, but more than a handful inspect the dirt for breakfast. Reclining back on his bench, Morgan watched a female thrush sort out some random pieces of litter in search of edibles. *Paper, plastic, plastic, metal, insects!* After the thrush ate her fill, she gathered up some useable pieces of trash and flew them over to her nest, well hidden in a bush. He was reminded of his own behavior, just moments ago by the dumpster.

Another familiar noise battled the sing-song, though hardly audible. Feeling a rumble from under his worn flannel jacket, Morgan remembered his hunger. He pulled open his plastic sack extracting a fruit pack and tossing a handful of trail mix out for the birds. Peeling back the foil on the sweet mixed fruit, he fingered one small piece into his mouth at a time, chewing slowly, sucking the juice out, savoring each piece and flavor. In a lovely hypnosis, Morgan watched the birds while reminiscing about their story.

Before this was here, the place seemed devoid of any real life. Back then there were only pigeons or finches—and that's fine—but there was nothing but sidewalks and pavement, and all they had to eat was garbage. Their songs were different, too. One would find them sometimes, stone cold on the sidewalk, from something they ate. People got tired of the birds around the city. They were "vermin," not "creatures of God," who the general population *claims* to support otherwise.

The "bird problem" escalated into an all-out battle: the Feathers versus the Skins. Candy bar wrapper nests were found in front of every soiled storefront. The locals rallied to the mayor for action. His solution: poison. Why cure the disease if the symptoms can be treated, right?

But a brutal financial war was waged, and the advertisements and activism of one person brought the ethical issue to bear in the public sphere. The locals banded together, and the following year the work to demolish the burned down buildings and foundation that once made up the old Opera House Circle went into effect. Within five years the newly settled bird refuge, making up most of the four squared blocks in the center of the city, brought tourism and life back to the city once again.

The sun almost at zenith, Morgan finished a can of Miller Lite and proceeded to stroll about the park. He felt privileged to visit the park and watch them. They stray into the city once in a while—and mostly people don't mind anymore—but more often the birds remain happily roosted around their bushes and trees. He often wonders what this land looked like before industry was born. Back when there were never any buildings on these four blocks, for instance, could it possibly have resembled this manmade creation that he flocks to with eagerness each day?

Closing his eyes after yet another calming day at the refuge and lying back on his favorite bench, arms bent to cushion his head, Morgan together with the city wilderness heaved a final sigh and drifted into the sort of tranquility that only complete satisfaction can bring.

"Alright, Mac. Up and out, up and out."

A soft touch of the nightstick to his rib was all it took for Morgan to obey the officer. He didn't want any trouble, and of course this has happened before. Morgan put on his dusty tweed cap, gathered up his plastic sack and the empty beer can from the grass and headed back toward his alleyway at Ninth. Just a short stop to gather some nesting materials for his potato sack and he'd be out like a canary in a covered cage until the sun beckons him once again, instinctively toward his refuge. As he approached the demarcation segregating luscious grass from asphalt, Morgan couldn't help but sense the irony. Over a decade ago people banished some pesky birds from *their* proclaimed land. Now, years after his leadership in that fight to build this beautiful refuge, Morgan is the one out of place on the city streets.

The End

How to Start a Fire

John Agar

A miniature cloud of dust puffed around my Hush Puppies as I stepped from the comfort to the air conditioned passenger bus into the sweltering heat of late August. The moment of departure from my safe-haven, I was greeted with beads of sweat rolling down my face—as well as a few unmentionable places. I could nearly see my suit being ruined from the perspiration dripping down my back. In hindsight, I probably should have removed my jacket but what's the use of a beautiful suit sans jacket? Can you imagine? How ridiculous.

Examining the area, I noticed I was in the middle of nowhere. There were hardly any buildings, just trees. Hundreds of trees, providing shade that did little to help with the heat. With its lack of paved roads, and subsequent lack of civilized people, I immediately began cursing my editor for ever giving me this assignment. The "Band's Big Break" contest seemed intriguing at first, but the intrigue wore off the second I knew I would be following a heavy metal band known as RUI. RUI, I learned, was an acronym for "Rednecks Under the Influence" or "Rockin' Under the Influence," depending on the person asked. Either way, I wasn't exactly thrilled with the task at hand, especially upon learning that I would have to spend two weeks in hell-like weather, not to mention the swarms of bugs attacking me.

I looked over my shoulder at the bus driver and gave him a pondering look. "Sorry, end of the line," he explained, "We don't go any farther. Company policy."

The bus sped away, spewing dirt and dust from the "road" all over my suit. If it wasn't ruined before, it was now. I might've been able to dry clean it but I decided to dump it when I got to my destination. I couldn't possibly pass up the opportunity to splurge on another suit.

Searching every direction, I found no sign of life, save for one lone soul in a rundown shack that must have been a convenience store. As I opened the door, a wave of heat hit me square in the face. I didn't think it was possible but it was about 20^0 hotter inside the shack than it was in the sun.

"Can I hel' ya'?" the clerk asked in an odd Cajun influenced southern drawl. He was quite stereotypical: unshaved, with long, greasy hair. He was wearing jeans that apparently had been attacked by a runaway lawn mower and a tattered tank top, the kind affectionately referred to as a "wife–beater."

"Do you happen to have any Evian?" I asked wondering if he happened to live in a trailer.

The clerk stared at me with one eyebrow cocked.

"Water," I clarified, "I could use some water."

He gestured toward the corner, not at a cooler filled with glorious bottled water, but to a crude water fountain. As much as I wanted to turn around and catch a bus back to the airport where I could buy a fresh bottle, I was already starting to feel groggy from dehydration. The water was ice cold as it brushed past my face, much to my satisfaction. My satisfaction quickly turned as I gulped down my first drink of Louisiana water. It tasted like rust covered dirt. I opted for a bottle of grape Gatorade.

"Do you where I can find an establishment known as 'Ned's Tavern?' It sounds like a fancy venue." I jested. He didn't seem too amused.

"Ned's? Four miles that way," he jerked his head to the left.

"How am I supposed to get there?" I received my answer with a simple glance over the counter at my feet. I purchased a second Gatorade for the trip and set out on my trek.

An hour and a half later, I stumbled into a packed Ned's Tavern albeit a half an hour late. A rusty lean-to, Ned's wasn't the type of bar I was used to. Nobody was dressed to impress, just a collection of sixty some-odd men in wife-beaters and flannel shirts with the sleeves cut off, and a handful of scantily clad women. Nobody was drinking fancy cocktails, just beer and simple concoctions of alcohol mixed with coke. There wasn't anybody dancing, except for the ten person mosh-pit directly in front of the band. The stage was nonexistent, just a dirty rug placed in the middle of the bar floor, four sweaty dudes crammed on top of it.

RUI was smack dab in the middle of the one hour set and I was absolutely broken up about missing it. How could I ever survive knowing I missed a half hours worth of mediocre Pantera imitation? Now, I may have been a bit too harsh there, they weren't half bad. They weren't half good either, but I didn't feel the need to run, run away, as I had envisioned. All in all it was… pretty forgettable actually. That was, until the encore. An encore that consisted of one song. A song so modestly entitled "The Greatest Song You've Ever Heard Before In Your Life." By the show I just witnessed, I sure was expecting the prophecy to be fulfilled.

Sarcasm aside, the song was pretty damned great. Not quite the greatest I've ever heard, though it is my job to travel around the world and listen to music. It very well could have been the greatest that the rest of the crowd has witnessed. A melodic, immensely complex guitar arrangement (with minimal accompaniment of drums and bass) poured out of a talented young guitarist who also took over vocal duties—scarce as they were—for the song. The rest of the band grooved along onstage, with an exception of the vocalist who was held up at the bar glaring at the guitarist, a shot of some dark brown alcohol in his right hand. Twelve minutes of amazing guitar work later, the band abandoned the stage to a deafening round of applause.

"RUI, my name is Stephen Lyndon. I'm here for the 'Band's Big Break' contest. That was a spectacular show ending, one of the best I've witnessed in my fourteen years of reporting."

"Nice ta meet ya, Steve," the burly drummer took my hand. "This is Scott," he pointed towards the bassist, "Alan," towards the vocalist, "they call me 'Bear,' and that little prodigy over there is Syd," he motioned towards the guitarist sitting on his amp, detached from the group. "Syd don't talk much."

"Well, Syd, I hope you talk to me, it would really help the story." I pleaded with the young man. Syd just nodded in my direction.

"Mr. Lyndon, it's time for our post-show ritual. Five shots a' Jack and back to the house fer the after party," Bear chimed in, seemingly the spokesman for the band.

"I'm not much of drinker," I revealed, thinking of my usual one martini that I would slowly sip throughout the night.

"You ridin' with us, you gots to drink!" That statement I would soon learn is the motto of RUI and a proper representation of the next two weeks of my life.

Twenty minutes and five shots later, we were approaching the RUI house in a cramped Volkswagen mini-bus filled with five sweaty men and six equally sweaty females. My head was spinning and I was being squashed between two scantily clad women (not that I was complaining) when we came to a screeching halt. My body jerked foreword as I struggled to hold my liquor. I managed to, barely.

The house was much too small for all four band members, but they all managed to occupy the residence. A kitchenette, a living room, one bedroom, and a bathroom were all filled with partying people. Everybody must have come from Ned's.

Thirty minutes of raucous partying later, I found myself being dragged out the back door by three members of an inebriated RUI. "Wh-what's going on?" I asked.

"You're gonna learn how to start a fire," Alan slurred.

"I think I know how to start a fire."

"Not like us," Bear chimed in.

Hey dropped my hard on the dead grass that was their back yard. I felt dizzy as I fought to keep down my liquid dinner, a battle I lost. After I emptied the contents of my stomach all over a defenseless dandelion, I noticed two heaps of sticks and shrubbery. I watched as Alan and Scott each poured the contents of a gas can on their respective wood piles.

"Now, there're three ways to start a fire: the cocktail method, the Harry Potter method, and the boring method," Bear explained. "I'm sure you're familiar with the boring method. That's the one most people use." He proceeded to explain the "boring method" as if he were a Boy Scout counselor. "We don't use the boring method," he chuckled.

"So, what method do we use?" I asked.

"Well, that depends on who you ask," Scott explained. "If you're Alan, you use the cocktail method. I prefer to do it Harry Potter style." He looked at Bear. "He just likes to watch it burn."

"But tonight, we gonna figure out whatchya like," Bear said handing me a Roman candle. "This is the Harry Potter method."

I looked at him, confused. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Pretend you're Harry Potter," he explained as he lit the Roman candle with a lighter emblazoned with a confederate flag. The first fireball exploded into the air in a brilliant flash. This was not met with "oohs" and "ahhs" as is tradition, rather grumbles and instructions to point the next fireball at the pile of gas soaked sticks. The next few flaming balls soared right past the pile. I steadied my hand as best I could in my drunken stupor and the final fireball connected with the pile, erupting like a volcano, as the entire pile engulfed in flames. The crowd cheered, but only momentarily.

Before I could even wrap my head around my actions, Bear shoved a half emptied bottle of brown liquor in me left hand. I recognized it to be Jack Daniels based on the color and shape of the bottle, although I can't be certain; the label had been peeled off. I attempted to take a swig, assuming this was my order. Based on the previous happenings of the evening, it must have been. It wasn't. Bear stuffed an oily rag into the neck of the bottle.

"Ya only got one chance this time," he said with a grin as he lit the rag with that same confederate flag lighter. So, cocktail method meant Molotov cocktail. I should've guessed.

I hurled the bottle with all the might I could muster from my left hand. I probably should've switched to my right, my more coordinated hand, but I was too intoxicated to think that far ahead. The bottle crashed to the ground directly in front of the pile and I was met by the jeers of the crowd. Luckily, the flames happened to find a trail of gas leading to the wood pile and it managed to catch on fire. The jeers converted to cheers as the pile ignited. It wasn't as spectacular as everyone had expected, but I had managed to light both piles.

We sat around the fire, drinking and talking for hours until I noticed that someone was conspicuous by his absence. "Where's Syd?"

"Who cares?" Alan barked back. "He can go to hell for all I care."

"Come on, man," Bear tried to reason with the angry vocalist.

"No, no, no. Why are you always trying to protect that asshole?" The anger ringing in Alan's voice, he continued, "He doesn't like any of us. He doesn't care about any of us. He doesn't contribute anything to the group."

"What about…," Scott tried to interject.

"Don't you even say 'The Greatest Song!'" he commanded. "He wrote one song. One. One song that has nothing to do with us. One song that doesn't even sound like us. One song that steals the show. Night after night. All anyone care about is that goddamned song."

"Alan, man, he's a good guitarist. He's a good guy. He's just likes to be alone," Bear attempted to soothe the scathing singer.

"He doesn't care about the band," Alan said

in a rather calm tone. "He wants the spotlight."

"That's not true," Bear argued.

"Yes, it is," Alan tried to convince the beastly drummer. "Nobody else plays on the song. Not really."

"Ya know, he's got a point," Scott interrupted.

"Shuttup," Bear commanded Scott. "Look, let's just all go to bed. Sleep off the alcohol. It'll be okay in the morning."

The partygoers meandered away, presumably to their own places of residences. RUI retreated into their house as I sat alone in the middle of two smoldering piles of ash.

"You coming?" Scott called out to me from inside the kitchen.

"Nah, I'm gonna stay out here for a while."

I awoke in a puddle of my own perspiration, my back aching from my bed of scorched grass and dirt. My eyes burn burning in the sun, I noticed a figure sitting on a lawn chair to my right.

"Hey, Syd," I said, noticing the stale alcohol and vomit taste in my mouth.

"Hey," Syd responded, sounding distant.

"We missed you last night."

"I bet," he answered in sarcasm.

"Well, I did," I explained. "Where're the guys?"

"Fishing. They didn't want to wake you."

I stretched my aching body. "I'm hungry. Want to get something to eat?"

I sat with Syd at Caroline's Corner Café, which was only a block away from the RUI residence. I was so hungry, I could've eaten anything. Upon seeing the dusty, miniscule eatery, I was prepared for the worst. I was delightfully surprised when my steak and eggs arrived. Everything was cooked to perfection, one of the best meals I've ever eaten. I looked at Syd, shoving a spoonful of grapefruit into his mouth.

"You excited for the show tonight?" I asked him. He answered by simply shaking his head back and forth. "Why not?"

"What's the point?" he asked hypothetically. "We play the same songs, for the same people, in the same bar every night. We're not making any money. We're not finding success. We're not even playing good music."

"It's not bad," I argued halfheartedly.

"It's crap. It's the same crap that every other band in our 'scene' plays. I don't like it. I never liked it."

"Wait, what?" I inquired.

"I don't like heavy metal. I don't like Pantera. Give me The Beatles, give me Dylan, give me Pink Floyd. Give me talented songwriters. Not this 'I'm angry. Let's get drunk and scream' crap. There's no artistry in it."

"Why do you do it?"

"Because Jimmie asked me."

"Who?"

"Bear. He's my uncle. RUI was desperate for a guitarist, and he asked me to fill in for a few weeks. That few weeks turned into a few years a little too

quickly. And I don't know if I can take it anymore."

"That sounds familiar," I said under my breath.

"What was that?"

"Last night, Alan went off. Saying you didn't care about the band."

"He would know."

With that, he left. At the time of this writing, he hasn't returned. The show that night was cancelled, to focus on finding a new guitarist. They found one a few days later, a scrawny skinhead named Derek. I spent the next week with RUI. They sound pretty much the same, like just another Pantera rip-off. Nothing special.

I still keep in touch with RUI, for they gave me a pretty eventful two weeks. They are currently in the process of recording their debut album. They are hoping to release it early next year. If you like the southern metal sound, pick it up; you should enjoy it. If that's not your usual taste, the album probably won't change your mind about the genre.

I received a letter from Syd, just yesterday. He has moved to Chicago. He has a job giving tours at the Art Institute. A job which he loves. He is also working on an album, a solo record. There is no tentative release date, but he says he'll keep me informed.

Thinking about my two weeks spent with Rednecks Under the Influence, I am thankful to the band. It was an experience that I will cherish for the rest of my life. I learned a lot; they taught me how to start a fire.

The End

Photo by Sarah Wachowski

Inertia

Katelyn Harned

She looks battered, and I haven't even touched her. She is just so eager to please, and I'm the one person she can never make happy.

Her favorite movie's *Beauty and the Beast*; she's not much for change, so it probably always will be. She loves pop music and boy bands, but I'll never let her admit it. Her eyes remind me of the moon; they are completely reflective. She's a dreamer; she hopes to become a well-known author someday. She also believes that true love can make it through anything, but I'd rather keep the pressure off.

The stale air in the messy room is enough to suffocate. There are clothes everywhere. It reminded me of her thoughts; sometimes I complain because they are so loud and unorganized. It's as if I'm in the middle of a crash on the freeway.

Her red hair falls in waves halfway down her back, but it doesn't cloak her face. It's more like a frame around her emotions. She has a firm chin, strong from being held up against oppressions. At the moment, it is tucked against her chest, and her head rests on her knees.

She's curled up on the bed leaning against the adjoining walls. My back is against the walls of the opposite corner, as far from her as I can be while still in the same room. The walls we are touching never meet, and neither do our eyes.

It makes me sick to see this room; to see the disarray, and her, fitting so perfectly in it. I begin to creep toward the door, as if sudden movement would spook her from hiding. The last thing I want is for her to come out.

It's 60 degrees inside the house. The metal doorknob shines and feels warm to my touch. I look back slowly and watch as she shakes. She looks so small; did I make her that way?

As the door closes behind me, it clanks like the door of a jail cell. She is in, and with me as the guard, there is no way to escape.

Walking outside, I am surprised to find the cold air comfortable. The street is empty, and the quite is a relief. I'm met by a memory.

She must have been about seven. Pulling open the door that appeared to weigh more than she did, she let him through before her. He was nine and looked upset, but her faced showed that she planned to fix that.

His skateboard broke the day before, right in two after his awesome skate trick, the only one he had mastered. She knew that he secretly dreamed of someday becoming a famous skater. How would he ever do that without a skateboard? She also knew that he was two years older than she. It wouldn't be long before he put away his board and left his dreams with it, and that's the last thing she wanted.

The images washed over me like the salivary sensation before vomiting. The money she planned

to spend was the end of her birthday money, and more than half of the total. It would have come in handy today, if she hadn't been so loose with it.

But she loved him and felt like it was her duty to look out for him. She always forgets that her first responsibility is to look out for herself.

I have her all figured out, but I still can't understand her. That scares her more than anything else, if I can't understand her, then who ever will?

She is suddenly next to me. "You said it would be better after high school."

There is almost no emotion in her voice. Only I would have been able to hear the pout on her lips. It seems odd to me that after all these years, she is still the same seven year old.

But I can't argue—she's right. I can see her thoughts of freedom and adventure. I see the days spent only writing that she yearns for. Lunch dates and late nights flicker into focus.

I think about telling her to wait for the next graduation, but part of being practical is learning from your mistakes.

I just want to be left alone. I don't want to answer any more questions, and I don't want to have to answer to anyone. Unfortunately, one must answer to the self.

And she is waiting.

"I have plans; things that have to be accomplished."

It was true. My ten-year plan is all written out. I'm going to finish school early with no debt; I just have to take extra classes each semester and work extra hours. I'm going to graduate with honors and get a great job. It might wear me down some days, but eventually it will all be worth it.

"I have dreams! Don't they matter?"

She stepped in my way and refused to move. I will not go around her.

"Your dreams—we'll get to them later. This is more important right now."

"You can't just forget about me!"

"Can't you see that I'm trying to protect you?"

"You think I'm naive." She paused, and her eyes pierced me. I knew her anger was the only weapon that she had, but I had forgotten it was lethal. "You think you can get rid of me. Is that what you want? Do you really want me gone?"

I refuse to respond. It scares me that I have no idea what I want. Her eyes search me, and in them, I begin to see the things about me she doesn't.

The quiet of the street is shattered. Even in our silence, the wind is deafening. Her anger is beginning to subside. I have to get her to calm down. I need to get back in control.

"You've let them tell you that this is what we need."

She doesn't get it; this is the way the world works. Without college—without a real career—no one can be secure.

She sighs before speaking. "The things which you have seen you now can see no more."

She begins walking away. She knows that I will question her strange words. I don't want to, but I can't help it. I have to know of what she's accusing.

"Is that supposed to mean something?" I speed my pace to catch up with her.

"Just that 'the child is father of the man.'" Stopping again, she looks at me for a moment. "Obviously you haven't heard that one." She walks ahead.

That doesn't make sense. She's just putting words together. She wants to make me think she has gained some insight that I haven't.

I know by now that the only way to win this fight is to let her think that she is, in fact, the victor. I sometimes have to relent a little; I can't let her go.

She is shaking in the cold air. The more I think about her faults, the more comfortable the cold air becomes. I give her my coat; it is my peace offering.

"I can't give up school, but I will cut back on work. It's all I can give you right now."

She pulls her hair out over the coat and a smug look flashes over her face. The wind dies down and the silence returns. She doesn't say a word, but slows her pace and we fall in step beside each other. A single shadow stretches out before us and makes me realize that as much as I hate to admit it, I must; we are one.

The End

Photo by Timothy Ojo

Letting Go

Evan Hixon

A wiser man than myself once said that when you stare long enough into the abyss, the abyss begins to stare back. For as long as I had been here, staring into nothingness, I knew there was nothing to look back at you. The wind was picking up all around me, and my hands were beginning to grow sweaty against the railing. How long had I stood up here, staring into the water below me? I had forgotten myself. Part of me wanted to let go and plunge into the abyss below; put an end to it all. But even as my mind told me to let go, my hands would have nothing of it. After something like two hours, I gave in and stepped down from the railing. Before I left, I took one last look back into the emptiness, praying I would see something.

Later that morning, I woke up far too early. Rolling out of bed, trying my hardest to avoid making noise, I ducked into the kitchen to make myself some early morning bacon. Standing over the stove, the events from the night before played over and over, vividly in my mind. After a while, what actually happened began to blend with what I thought had happened, and it all became an oddly surreal experience. Lost in my inane thoughts, I barely noticed the voice calling behind me.

"You came in late last night, Dante. Were you drunk again?"

"No, sweetheart, I was not drunk last night," I responded, and while I resented that 'drunk' was her first response to my lateness, it was far from a bad guess.

"Then where were you?" she asked, her voice betraying that she didn't really want an answer.

"I was out on a walk." I said. It wasn't technically a lie, and I imagined that 'I was on a bridge contemplating killing myself' would only end in a conversation I had no desire in having.

"Out on a walk?"

"Yes."

"You were out on a walk, at one in the morning, and you decide to wake up at the break of dawn to make bacon?" Silence filled the air as she waited for a response. "Is something wrong?"

"No." I could tell she thought I was lying, but I hoped she would leave it at that. Thankfully, she walked out of the room and left me to cook my bacon.

As she got dressed and left for work, I was left with the apartment to myself. I knew I would have to be dressed for an interview later that day, but at this point, I couldn't be bothered. A year ago, my company had declared bankruptcy and everyone lost their jobs. Since then, I'd gone through four dozen interviews and they had all turned up dry. So now, lounging around in my underwear, eating my bacon, I questioned whether or not it was really worth my time to get dressed, waste three hours of

my life, only to be told some kind of public relation crap by a guy in a suit that cost more than I had made in the last year.

This would be the fourth interview I had skipped out on this month. While I could see the problem with what I was doing, it was so damn easy to say 'fuck it' and call it a day. It was a terrible rut to have fallen into; wake up, plan my day, then give up and do something trivial.

Of the course of the last month, I had watched over a hundred hours of television, spent more time than any sane person should spend browsing the internet, taken up and abandoned nearly a dozen hobbies, all in an effort to remain sane. Also in the last month, I had begun taking my late night walks. Sometimes I would walk around the block for hours on end. Other times, I would spend hours hanging around whatever local business hadn't closed and didn't mind having an aimless twenty-four-year-old loitering around. And sometimes I would end up at the Ninth Street Bridge and spend the night just looking down into the dark water. I tried to avoid thinking too hard about it, and television usually helped with that. The distraction de jour today was *The Price is Right* and while I had no real reason to watch, I did. Finally, fatigue washed over me and I collapsed on the couch.

"How long have you been sleeping?"

I slowly opened my eyes to see my fiancée, Anne, standing in the doorway. Looking over at the clock, I realized that I had been asleep for nearly six hours since I passed out. "Not long, maybe an hour."

"How'd the interview go?"

"Doesn't look good. They were looking for someone with sales experience to manage the floor. Apparently PR training isn't good enough anymore."

Anne dropped the bags she was holding and slumped into the chair near me. "This is getting insane. We are barely making the rent. I heard the insurance company on Main Street is looking for someone. You could look there.

"Yeah. I'll call tomorrow." Anne walked into the kitchen as I contemplated falling back asleep. Shaking off that notion, I simply returned to watching television and waiting for dinner.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, until my six-hour nap caught up with me. Anne fell asleep around midnight and not wanting to wake her, I decided to take my third late night walk of the week.

I threw on my coat and walked outside. The wind was abnormally fast tonight but that wasn't about to stop me. I spent an hour wandering the town, with no real sense of where I was going. The 7-11 I frequented had been robbed two days before and as such, they were a little on edge about having random people hanging around, so I was forced to continue my wandering.

Forty minutes later, without even realizing it, I had found my way back to bridge overlooking Jordan's River. For some reason, being here was calming. I could hear the river flowing some thirty

feet below me, and for some reason, that brought me a bit of peace. Slowly, I walked over to the railing, and upon noticing no one else around, I stepped onto the hand railing and started gazing down into the river. It looked still, and the moon reflecting off the water was a wonderful sight.

But again, I looked down and saw nothing. I saw an empty darkness that was simply reflecting the light of the moon. It had an eerie beauty to it; a strange indescribable quality that made it an ideal spot to just stand and think.

It was only recently that I had begun to have thoughts of just letting go and falling into the water. I had never contemplated suicide before, and it was only here that I would even entertain the idea. Hell, I had no desire to end my life. The only people who end their lives are the people who think it would matter. But as I stood on the edge of the bridge, looking into the water, my mind was telling my hands to let go. I was holding on to the bars tighter than I ever had before, and I knew I wasn't going to let go, but a voice in my head just kept telling me to let go.

I had this argument with myself a half a dozen times already, and the end result was always the same. I would walk to the bridge, stand on the side and think about my life.

In my mind, I never really contemplated suicide. Suicidals were the kind of people who make a big show out of their deaths. They were the kind of people who thought that taking their lives is a show of something. I could never bring myself to think that. If I let go, no one would care. Sure, my family might mourn, and Anne may grieve for a little, but those feelings would pass and their lives would resume. Oddly, I think it was that thought that kept me going. No point ending something that had no value.

I continued my mental monologue until a particularly cold blast of wind brought me back to reality. Looking down at my watch, I noticed I had been up here for nearly two hours.

I slept fairly well that night. Anne had long since left the apartment when I woke up, so there was no need to make no pretenses of being productive today. Making a fresh plate of bacon, I sat down and enjoyed a very peaceful morning. I contemplated going downtown to apply for the insurance company job, but I settled on a phone call. Far less effort expanded on something that would inevitably fail, I thought to myself.

After a few minutes running around in circles with their secretaries, I finally managed to get a hold of someone in human resources. "Hello, this is Janette Richards, Human Resources speaking, how may I help you?"

"Hello, my name is Dante Jones. I was informed that you were hiring in your PR department."

"Yes, we are hiring for a few positions. If you're interested, we would be more than happy to look over your résumé and get back to you."

"Thank you. I'll see what I can do." I had no desire to get dressed and leave, but I had no real options at this point. I darted to my room and found

a copy of my résumé collecting dust on my desk. The few hours passed uneventfully, as I was barely paying attention as various people looked over my information before settling on an interview the next day. I was hoping for an interview that day, but I was in no place to make demands.

Anne returned to the apartment later that night. I tried to say something, but she spoke before I had a chance. "Did you go down to the insurance company?"

"Yes. I got an interview. Said they would talk to me tomorrow."

"That's great, Dante. Hopefully this one pats off. What do you want for dinner?" She never paused. She had stopped getting excited about my job opportunities. I knew she didn't realize she was doing it, but I could tell she was getting depressed.

Dinner was quiet and uneventful. I had eaten a lot earlier that day, and I had nothing worth talking about. Anne was talking about some mundane event at work. A chance meeting with a boss, something about an accent, I was hardly paying attention. It wasn't that I didn't care. Well, I didn't care, but I wanted to feign interest, and I couldn't even manage that. Anne obviously didn't see that and just keep going on.

I didn't even bother getting into bed that night. I just went out shortly after Anne went to bed. It was warmer than the night before, and I was thankful for that. I wasn't in a wandering mood, so I just made my way to the bridge. Standing over the bridge for the third time in three days, I wasn't thinking about why I came here. The only thing I could think of was the emptiness below me. There was no moon tonight, and the bridge was so high up that streetlights were barely reflecting off the water. If I let go, I wasn't even sure that I would hit the water. I might just fall forever. That was I nice idea, I thought. Give some time to think. Give me a place to be other than this damn bridge. I knew I wouldn't fall forever, though. If the water didn't stop me, then something else would. That or I would run out of food. Either way, I would eventually have to stop falling.

It was a serene idea I thought, a never ending fall; one that would never come to pass, but a serene one nonetheless. If I let go, I would fall for ten seconds, then I would hit the water and then… nothing. I really didn't like that. The end result was terrifying, but getting there seemed magical. For the first time, I let one of my hands go. I felt the weight of my body shift. I wanted to let go, but I relented.

It was three in the morning when I got home. I knew I had to be up early the next morning, so I curled up in bed and tried to drift to sleep. But try as I might, my body had no desire to sleep. Maybe my erratic sleep schedule was catching up with me, but nothing I did could lull me to sleep. I sat motionless in bed for hours until, finally, fatigue washed over me and I passed out in a deep restless sleep.

My alarm clock forced me awake at nine o'clock the next morning. I barely forced myself awake, and I knew that I would be a wash if I was

this tired. I had no desire to leave the comfort of my bed. So, I didn't. I reached over; pulled the plug out of my alarm clock and feel into some of the most restful sleep I could remember.

At one in the afternoon, I rolled out of bed and threw some bacon on the stove. I knew I would have to deal with missing the interview, so I feel back on my usual plan when confronted with a problem like this. I would lie.

I called up the insurance company, knowing they would be angry with me for missing my interview. I had decided that I would tell them I was sick. It was a convenient excuse, and if they had a problem with me being sick, then I knew this was a company I had no desire to work for anyway. They were fairly understanding and agreed to reschedule, so I counted that as a victory. From there, I fell down on to the couch, where I would remain until Anne returned.

"How'd the interview go?" She was unusually optimistic when she said that. It almost made me sad when I had to lie to her.

"They called this morning. Their HR person was sick today, so they had to reschedule. What are you gonna do?"

"Ohh. Well, at least it wasn't a rejection. That's good news." It wasn't, but at least I could humor her.

"They sounded like they really wanted to talk to me. I have high hopes."

I had no reason to lie to her. Well, telling her that I didn't care about the job would probably cause some problems, but at this point, it was beyond my ability to care. I just wanted to go to bed.

Shortly after dinner, I decided I wasn't feeling all that well, and excused myself to bed. Anne wanted to do something or another; she had been complaining about us not doing things together, but I wasn't really interested in humoring her anymore than I already had.

I fell asleep at ten that night, it was a deep restless sleep, and my mind wasn't helping. I was dreaming about the bridge, but this time it wasn't dark. The sun as rising and I could see into the water below me. There were no rocks at the bottom, and the depths seemed to go on forever. It was a beautiful sight and I wasted to experience it up close. I took my hands off the railing and let myself fall forward. For a moment, it was indescribable. The wind rushed through my hair and I saw the water rushing towards me. But the closer I came to it, the darker it got and the less I wanted to break the surface. And for some reason, I never did. I just hovered there in limbo above the river. It was the greatest feeling I had ever experienced.

I shot up in bed. Turning to look around, I saw the clock. I was 5 AM Slowly, I got out of bed and got dressed. Not ten minutes later, I was in my car driving towards the Ninth Street Bridge. I didn't know what I would find there, but I knew it would be important. Thankfully, the bridge was empty when I arrived.

The sun had already started to rise. I looked down at the water, and it was nothing like my

dream. This was the first time I had seen the water with any amount of real sunlight. It was dark and murky, definitely not the kind of thing I wanted to plunge into. I knew I didn't want to hit the water, but I still wanted to let go. Taking a deep breath, I stepped down. I knew I had no desire to kill myself, but I had no desire to keep going either. For the fourth night in a row, I had stood on this bridge, contemplating killing myself and for the first time, it all began to make sense. I wanted to let go, to see what the abyss below me was like, but I wouldn't let myself do it. So, I did what had always made sense when faced with a problem like this; I gave up. I told myself that it simply didn't matter and I stepped down from the bridge.

I knew Anne would wonder where I had gone, but I had no reason to leave. So, I just stood at the bridge, safely away from the railing, for some while longer. I didn't think about the water, or the river, or that abyss. I didn't think about anything important, and it all seemed to make sense.

I got home at around ten in the morning and felt relieved. Anne had left, and I had the house to myself. I knew what I had to do and wasted no time going to it. Picking up the phone, I reassured myself that I was doing the right thing and called the insurance agency.

"Hello, this is Janette Richards' office. How may I help you?"

"Hello, this is Dante Jones. I have an interview scheduled for today. I won't be making it. I have no desire to reschedule. Please tell Miss Richards that I apologize for wasting her time." Before she could respond, I had hung up.

I knew this was going to be a problem. I would eventually have to find a way to make money, and more importantly find a way to explain this to Anne. But right now, as I sat here, I couldn't be bothered to care, and that felt wonderful. This made sense to me, and that's all that really mattered.

My time at the bridge had given me a strong craving for some breakfast. Walking past the fridge, I pulled out the bacon and paused. Not worth the effort I thought. Putting it back in the fridge, I walked over to the cupboard and made myself a bowl of cold cereal.

The End

My mother, the Human

Felicia Dieguez

Ceasing to believe in God was much easier than ceasing to believe in Mother, because as a child, mother is much more god than God is. I spent much more time listening to Mother than I did praying to God, and I spent many more glorious hours in her presence than I did singing hymns and squirming in church. But by the time I was fourteen years old, I didn't believe in either anymore.

I walked home from school, dragging my feet the whole way although I was shivering even in my puffy coat. Just two years ago, I would have been practically skipping, eager to come home and tell my mom about my day. Maybe we would have worked a puzzle together, and made dinner between triumphantly finding the right pieces of the Disney castle or the Grand Canyon. Before I could shove those memories away, I caught glimpses of the red in her hair, accentuated by the late afternoon sun pouring in the windows, the smell of roast beef and onions, mixed with the sawdust smell of the puzzle. The warmth of the pine table we leaned on. I clenched my teeth and forced my brain to the first thing that wasn't memories. It went to homework, and I threw my thoughts into the paper I had to write on this book called *Hatchet*.

By the time I got home, I had calmed and figured out my introduction. I walked through the front door and was greeted only by the sound of muffled music and frenzied typing. The cold winter sun shone on the frosted glass of a half-empty bottle of cheap wine, and a pile of dirty dishes in the sink that had been there since the night before. I shed my coat and snow-covered shoes and dropped my backpack onto a chair at the dining table before venturing into the study beyond the kitchen.

"Hey, Mom."

She sat at the computer desk, leaning too closely to the screen, chewing bits of lipstick off of her lips. She had stopped typing at the moment. "I'm home."

She glanced my way. "Oh, hey Em." She was back to staring wide-eyed at the monitor before even finishing her greeting.

I leaned against the doorway. "Whatcha doing?"

She didn't tear her eyes away from the computer. "Oh, I'm just—" she was interrupted by a quiet *ping* from the computer speakers. She read whatever had popped up on the small conversation window, leaving her sentence open long enough that I knew she probably wasn't going to finish it.. Her mouth tightened, her brow creased. She got that look that she always gets when she's about to cry. That look that I had become all too familiar with. She grabbed her glass and drained the puddle of red that remained, then held it out to me without looking my way.

"Will you get me some more wine, Em?" The glass, with the stem barely held between her thin fingers, looked like it might slip out at any moment.

I stared at her, her back hunched over, her forehead resting in her free hand, and asked, "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine, Emma!" I jumped. She sighed, and started again, "I'm fine, honey. I just need more wine, ok? Please?" She looked out the corner of one eye at me.

I took the glass from her, and her hand dropped as if it had been freed from some great weight. As I was pouring the wine in the kitchen, the phone rang.

"Hi, Em!" greeted my aunt cheerfully. "Can I talk to your mom?"

Everyone was always so cheerful these days. They would call or come over "just to see how things are," and when they hung up or hugged me to leave they would say in a quiet, serious tone "If ever you need to talk, or just someplace to go, you know I'm here. We don't have to talk about it. We can just talk. You know we're here." And I would always nod and say thank you, as if I didn't know what they were talking about.

My mom's parents were especially obnoxious with the attempted comforting. Not only did they offer to let me spend the night to get away, but they especially wanted me to stay on Saturday nights. And I knew why. About a month after my parents announced that they were getting divorced, I stopped going to church. I remember the day it happened, the day I decided I didn't believe in God anymore. I remember the very moment. I sat in church, exhausted and puffy-eyed from a night of crying, and the pastor was saying that God has a plan for everyone. And that things may seem hard, but He was there with you, and all you had to do was reach out and you could feel him. It struck me suddenly how very senseless that was. I didn't feel any comfort from God when I cried myself to sleep. I was alone, more alone than I ever had been because of what was happening with my parents, not because of anything God had done. God wasn't there, nor had he ever been. Driving home that Sunday, I announced to my grandparents that I didn't like church, anymore.

I hesitated as I tried to think of what to reply to my aunt on the phone. "Um, Mom is…" I concentrated very hard on screwing the cap back on the bottle as I thought. "Mom can't talk. She's in the shower."

There was silence for a moment on the other end of the line. "Sweetie, she just sent me an e-mail not five minutes ago. It's pretty important that I talk to her."

I tried not to sigh. "Ok. Hang on." I took the phone and wineglass to my mom. She took the glass first, and took a big swig with her eyes closed. Her make-up was smudged and smeared with tears, and the wine settled into the new places she had bitten on her lips and turned them deep purple, clashing with her burgundy lipstick. She looked very much

like a tragic clown.

When I was little, I would watch her meticulously put on her make-up. She really had no reason to dress up; she never went anywhere. No, she was content with staying at home all day reading novels and magazines, playing little games, doing puzzles and crafts with me that we would graffiti the house with. Still, she looked every day like the President might drop by for tea at any minute. Every morning, after her cup of coffee, she would shower and sit at her lighted vanity, and select items from her enormous gilded box of make-up. She would so carefully apply it with pencils, applicators and creams. Then she would curl her hair with a curling iron that I wasn't allowed to go near. But I would watch in fascination as tiny wisps of steam rose from the hair tightly wound around the barrel. She would dress in skirts and blouses, or pants and soft sweaters. Always long sleeves, always long skirts or pants. Every morning, she would become the poised and sure figure that everyone knew; she would become something from a painting or sculpture. The thing you could help but trust and adore. Almost worship.

She set her half-empty glass on the desk. "Hello?" she spoke into the phone, and made a gesture to me that I took to mean that I should leave her alone, now. As I retreated, I heard her say, "No, I'm not! My life *is* over! What am I supposed to do, now?"

I went into the kitchen and began washing the dishes. I imagined that this was my house, and only my house. And there were so many dishes because I had just had a huge party with all my friends. No husband, though. It was just my house, and my party. I didn't need a husband, ever. If I had a kid, it was just mine. I adopted it. All by myself. And I would be a fantastic mother, just like my mom used to be. In this way, with these imaginings, I zoned out her frantic voice, screeching into the phone at my poor aunt.

As I was drying and putting away the dishes, my mom emerged from the study and went straight for the wine. She emptied the bottle, and looked long and hard at me before taking a long drink.

"I want him back, Em." She said simply. Her voice was stronger than I had heard it in weeks.

"But… Mom," I stuttered. "You can't be serious. You know he'll just—"

She put a hand out to silence me. "Em, we're broke. That guy I had been talking to, the broker? He isn't interested."

"Oh." I hoped she would go into the whole story. They were always so long. "What was this one's problem?"

Her eyes hardened. "The same problem that they all have." I didn't say anything, so she continued. "We need income. We can't afford this house. I can't afford to send you to school."

"Mom, you could get a job," I protested, "I can baby-sit. We can do this. We *don't* need him!"

"I haven't worked a day in my life." Her pitch raised a notch. "What do you expect me to do? Work as a cashier?"

I swallowed hard, and contemplated saying what I had to say. I decided to go ahead. "Would you rather having bruises over working as a cashier?"

She took another drink. "Working as a cashier or a babysitter won't be *enough*. We need your father's income. We all have to make sacrifices, hon. It's part of growing up. It's something you need to learn." A longer drink.

I shook my head and started to feel a sickness deep in my stomach at what she was saying. "Mom, you can't… you can't mean that. People don't have to put up with that!"

She put her glass down on the counter so hard some liquid jumped onto the countertop. "But I did, Em! I did for fifteen years!" She dropped her forehead into her hand again. The silence of the house was a heavy hum in my ears.

"Are you saying," I tried to breathe deeply. "Are you saying that that is something I'll need to learn to put up with?"

She didn't move. "Em, everything was fine until he turned on you. I only left him because he began to do to you what I had been putting up with for years. At first, I couldn't stand it: the thought of him hurting you. But now," she raised her head and looked straight into my eyes with her watery brown ones. "Now I realize that you are old enough to know how to handle it, because we have to, Em. If we want to have a roof over our heads, if we want to eat, we have to."

At that moment, I saw that my mother was not art, nor was she a goddess. And just as God had failed to comfort me now, when I most needed him, my mother failed me completely. The stone that had made her a sculpture was only money, only the freedom to live in leisure. And when that was pulled away, what was left was utterly human.

The End

Life in Water

Alejandro Hernandez

Taken by its docile current
Flowing down from stream to sea
Falling torrent hits the earth
Overflowing this sweet serenity
Blistering swells take me under
Submerging my head beneath the waves
Flooding out my body and mind
Helpless and hopeless; I cannot be saved
Undertow pulling me down
The more I struggle, the more I sink
Overwhelmed by raging falls
When all I wanted was a drink
Nature's nurture drowning me out
While I yearn for freedom among the trees
Thirst has been quenched; I need to breathe
Must leave this pool and sail the breeze
Sun shines down into the abyss
Breaking through the deep, dark blue
I swim towards the sunlit surface
And finally emerge for breath anew
Sea salt still lingers on my face
Leaving tracks from ocean rain
Drying me out and causing thirst
Now I long for water again

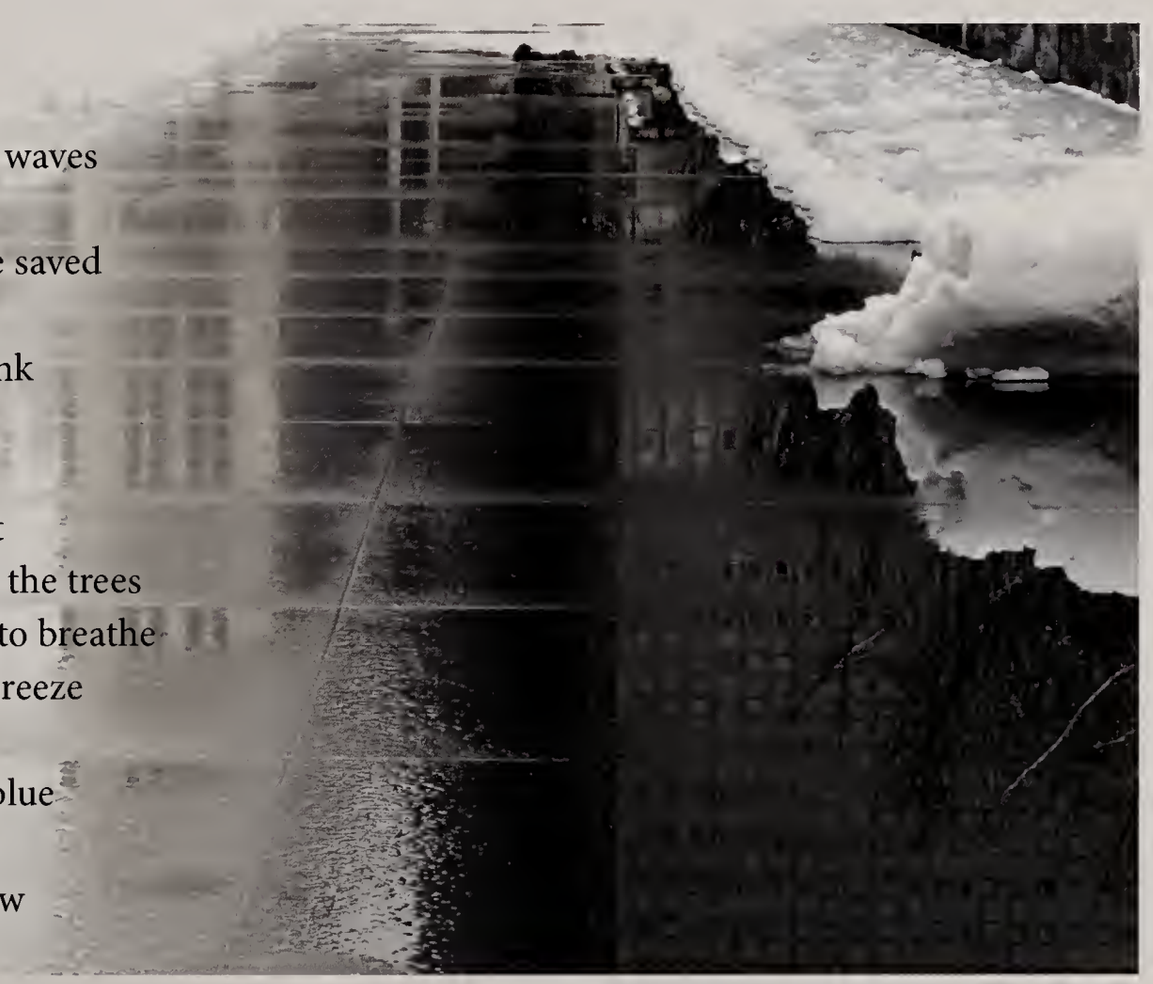

Photo by Megan Hannagan

Montenegro

Julie Caldwell

April opens
as if it is the water-logged
gates of Hell:
a downpour that shines
like Christmas lights
against the backdrop
of your black eyes.
We rush around and fumble
in our attempt to stay dry,
dodging under awnings,
wearing newspapers we can't read
as hats, umbrellas, make-shift shelter.

We jump puddles,
hopeful for a balanced,
flat-footed landing and still
we fall down the stairs
on purpose.
We both claim we'd been pushed.
Nursing injuries in the stairwell,
we laugh at each other
and ourselves.

A perfect mess:
an adequate definition
of offbeat explorers
in a tourist town
where no one speaks our language.

We drink warm, frothy beer,
and fall in and out of love
five times before midnight.
I grow an unexpected respect
for Central Standard Time

and for those kind of people
that seem to know better.

We try so hard.
We will never make sense.
We watch the day break as we wait
For an answer.

Son... Protect Your Brother

Jessica Ward

I only saw his hand,
The only part of him left in sigh.
The rest crushed beneath the rubble.

At first it reached out for me,
He stretched it as far as he could.

He use to scream with hope,
Then with desperation,
Then short whispers.

Hard to hear him with the others screaming.

I pushed and pulled, I lifted I tried,
I was supposed to protect him,
I was supposed to protect him.

When I lifted I heard his breath stretching out,
Reaching out just as his hand reached,
I pulled and pushed and pushed and pushed,
His whispers became shorter breaths,
Then dead silence.

I found his hand limp, his skin pale, his life…
Then I heard them telling me "Son… Protect your brother."

My hope became shocking reality,
Then became grief,
My heart ached.

My faith... defeated me?
My faith defeated me.
I was supposed to protect him.

Spring

Krisan Cieszkiewicz

The first frolic through the fresh green forest
Chasing the warm breeze marked by the trees' swaying leaves
Sounds of snapping twigs and brown crunch leftover from fall
Echo with my every leap and land

The sweet chirping of a bird sings over the steady beat of a woodpecker
I move in and out of shade
Warm and cool, light and dark
Stopping under a tree to catch my breath, the breeze catches my face

The aroma of black walnut and wild flower permeates the air
The rustling grass taps my ankles anxiously, nudging me to continue
I follow the friendly draft as it tugs my hemline,
Resuming our game of tag.

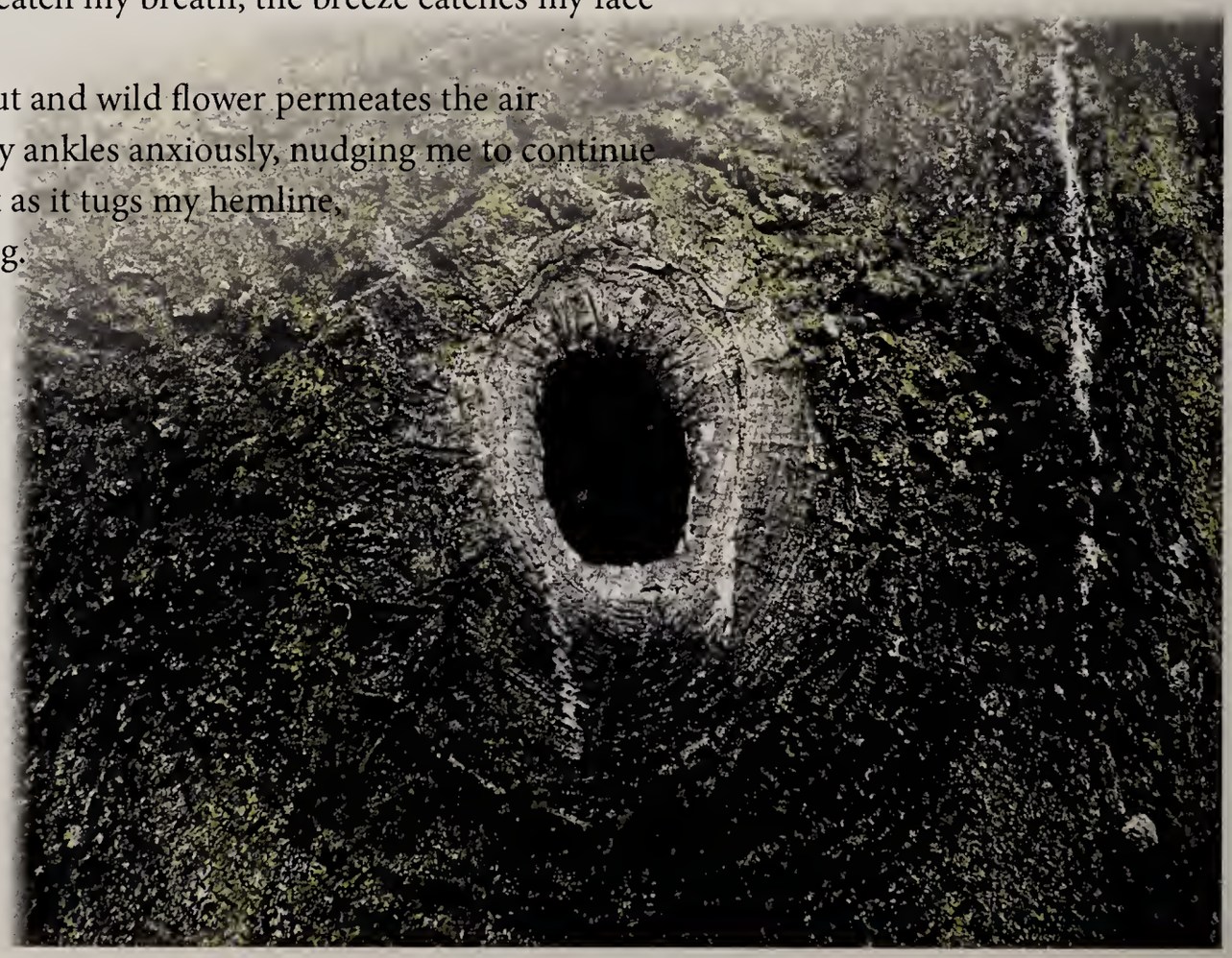

Photo by Timothy Ojo

Addict

Patricia Morgan

The day I realized my addiction was a day like any other day. It was a day in which life was as draining and shitty as always. The moment completely shattered any semblance of innocence that my confused world had afforded me. I was now well aware of a world where those things which are the worst seem the most attractive, and though no one talks about them, everyone partakes of some form or another of a guilty pleasure.

Oddly enough, however, the incident in which my realization came to fruition was one of pure happenstance. On this particular day, my mother had asked me to clean my bedroom, and as an obedient adolescent, I secluded myself into my bedroom and went to work on dust and debris alike. My room was in disarray, as I was always too focused on my studies to be bothered with how my room was arranged.

Upon reaching the dresser, I carefully clutched each perfume bottle and placed it onto my bed so as to not to shatter and spill the precious liquid. Once each bottle had been placed individually on the black and white comforter that I had requested for my birthday, I then grabbed the mirror on which they were placed and slipped it out from its frame. Grabbing the bottle containing the fluorescent blue glass cleaner, I spritzed enough to fully coat the glass. Palming a handful of paper towel, I placed it on the mirror and slid it down the length.

As the glass slid against the tender young pad of my thumb, I could imagine the metallic taste of the trickle of blood. As a younger person, I had abhorred pain of any kind. Not now. Not this moment. I craved the iron-rich juice from which I subsisted. I could feel as the skin laid open, and the sting was liberating unlike anything I had ever felt before in my life. I felt like now I had fallen in love—and my love was not pleasing or acceptable to the world. I was 13.

Finally, I had found something in which to manifest my emotions. The cold, eager slice of a kitchen knife palmed into my bedroom became my drug, my addiction. It started off as a casual fix, once a week at best. Before long, though, I had become as bad as an alcoholic—I would crave the twinge of pain late into the night, and I tried to hide it from everyone.

One day, my mother had found a poorly-concealed knife in my bedroom, and inquired as to what was its purpose. Like any addict, I came up with a lie so thinly-veiled that anyone who took more than a moment's glance at the situation would have seen through it. She, however, did not. I attribute this to the fact that she couldn't have cared less about anything that concerned my life; she was too busy screwing everyone she met at the bar. I never paid attention to the men she would

bring home, for I knew that it was only a matter of time before there would be another one. I never paid attention to them like she never paid attention to the assortment of elongated scabs that decorated my arms like bangles. I knew she couldn't have cared less.

Oftentimes, these men would beat me, and I would find that it blended well with my own self-abuse. All I could think about as I cut was how I was manifesting my pain in physical means. I was helping to make it worthwhile and real. The perfect alibi rested in the realization that I would be bruised and bloody whether or not I hated myself, and no one could hate me as much as I did. There was something instilled within me to tell me that it was wrong to do what I was doing, but I was hooked and I wasn't going to give it up.

Before long, I was wearing long-sleeved shirts during days when it was hot; I excused myself under the guise of my anemia. I realized the inconvenience of using my arms as a place to self-mutilate; my tender thighs became the alternative, and much easier to hide.

I had never put much weight on how this simple act was affecting my life until I went through what I thought was the worst pain one could ever experience in life—the dissolution of my first, real love. My devastation could never have been properly vented through crying alone. Never had I turned to cutting more than in this instance. It became the one thing that was constant in my life.

My addiction had become a competition—I would see pictures of other people who cut themselves, and I would imagine that I could do it deeper, wider, harder, better, I could hate myself more than they ever could. It didn't even matter anymore what I used—I would use anything that I could get my hands on to destroy myself. I would use safety pins, broken glass, kitchen knives, paperclips, porcelain knick-knacks.

I had never been devastated the way I was the day the realization became apparent that my ex would never be with me again. The fear of failing in love the way my parents failed could not have been topped by anything else. I feared being the slut my mother personified. I feared my father's indifference. I feared being hated by someone in whom I had placed my deepest love—and on this day, this fear became a reality.

The heaved crying stole the air from my lungs and made me weak unlike I had ever imagined that I could be. My eyes, sore and red and puffy, could barely make out the world around me, which, in my own mind's eye, was as fucked up as ever. My perception of life, love, trust, honesty, and promises was torn asunder. I was thrown into the wind with no sort of tether, and I was flying free—except this was a freedom that I could not support. What is freedom when someone doesn't understand the utility of it?

I had come to hate myself more than I had ever hated anyone or anything in the entire world. There were only a few limits that I was bound by when it came to self-mutilation. The biggest task became

that of concealment. If people saw, they'd question. If they'd question, they'd assume. If they assumed, I would become an enemy. While I hated myself, I enjoyed being left to my own devices, and I was not going to become someone's captive.

There came a day, however, when my boldness had become far more than I could ever have anticipated, and I found my boundaries being bent, torqued, shattered, obliterated, until finally they ceased to exist. Alone in my house, I was left to my own thoughts, which were rabid. Anyone who has ever loved can understand the deep-down, gut-wrenching fear of loneliness ever-present in love's absence.

On this day, I became frantic after reading a particularly nasty weblog written by my now-estranged first love. I was belittled, I was berated, I was "pointless," "useless," "an awful bitch," and more. Now, there was no restraint. Now, there was no one to save me from myself, and I was going to be my own worst enemy, my own destroyer.

I slammed the laptop shut, and shoved the chair out from behind my thin, pale, easily-bruised legs, and I turned on heel with a mission in mind. My hands were rubber as I struggled to open my bedroom door, and upon finally opening the door, I rushed into the bathroom, and threw open the medicine cabinet. My eyes scanned the length of it, the age and neglect wonderfully apparent on the mildew-stained shelves. Finally, my eye caught the glint of the shiny metal, and my hand lurched forward, seemingly with a mind of its own.

Before I knew it, I was dragging the cold, hard steel across the length of my delicate flesh, and I was not within myself anymore. The skin parted so willingly as the edge laid it open. This time was not like the other times. No. This time was different. This time, the blood's venture to the surface was not gradual. It was not slow. It was not lethargic. It stained my skin. It stained my pink skirt. It stained my white blouse. It stained the carpet and it made the floor slippery, it made my head spin and it made my eyes blurry with tears.

I was lost within my own world. A world in which I knew deep down that if someone did not come rescue me, I was going to die. My own screams were so far away. I fell back against the bathtub, my blood thirst seemingly sated. The sobs that stole my breath made me nauseous. The light began to fade as my eyes would not stay open any longer. Before all went dark, I heard the familiar clink of the metal cuticle scissors against the porcelain as my hand could not hold it tightly any longer.

When I woke up, I was amazed at the resilience of the human body, for though the floor around me was bloody, I had made it out of this endeavor alive. Because of this, I knew something had to change. My self-loathing had become the bane of my existence, and it threatened to also be its demise. I became determined to get through this, even if it meant abandoning my own tendency toward solitude. I became more resilient, I became more stable, I depended less on self-mutilation, and I remembered the day when I almost succeeded. Like

any addiction, I will never fully be clean from it. I will always have the urge, even if I don't act on it. I will forever have the scar that reminds me of when I let it all become too much for me.

The End

Photo by Timothy Ojo

Balloons

Jennifer Davis

Some people are raised in a 'bubble'. However a bubble is clear, you can see through it even if you can't experience the outside. I was raised in something more like a balloon; I had no idea what I was missing, and I had the kind of structured life that was bound for imploding around me. I come from many generations of Dutch and French Protestants; I was raised in the Christian faith. I don't come from the type of family that claims to be affiliated with a church, but never actually attends. I was held to a rigid standard of Christian values: faith, family, and the congregation. I attended a private Protestant institution from kindergarten through my senior year in high school, and I received an exceptional private education while simultaneously learning a very narrow view of the world.

In grade school, I was an above-average student, although I had a few tendencies that the school thought should be corrected: dyeing my hair, painting my nails with dark nail polish, and wearing mood bracelets and secular band t-shirts. I was one of those students that prompt's the discussion of school uniforms at board meetings, because I didn't quite present myself in the quiet, respectable church girl outfits. At parent-teacher conferences, my parents were routinely informed that I was not an image of the school's values—however I was rarely punished because of my academic standing and my active participation in school sports.

Shortly before I was to begin high school, my parents went their separate ways after twenty-two years of marriage. Both were remarried to new partners within the year; so it seemed to be a split that had been a long time coming. Divorce was an abomination in our faith, and my parents were excommunicated from the traditional red-brick Christian church we attended. Throughout my four years of high school, I moved back and forth each year between living with my dad and then my mother. Living with two different sets of newlyweds is terrible, and it hits a new sewer level of disgusting when it's your parents. It was a big change for me to see my parents affectionate in their new relationships; my entire life my dad had slept on a couch in the basement. Being the youngest of six children, I was the only child left living with my parents after the divorce. My parents were mostly free of their duties to raise their children together, and they'd both moved on to new spouses. My father and his new wife moved to Columbus, about six hours away from my mother. Even with the unstable and awkward situation, both of my parents still held me to live by the Christian values I was raised on, in spite of the acts that they'd been excommunicated for. I was still sent to my Christian high school, and both of my parents found new churches that accepted their failures. My resentment towards their hypocrisy grew; as I was no longer being raised by the two of them jointly – but was being shorted some imperative parenting in my teens. If I was with one parent, it meant that I was a

four-hundred and fifty mile drive from the other. I became an odd mixture of independent and clingy: I was independent from the parents that I didn't feel I could trust, but I held on to everything else familiar in my life.

When it came time for college decisions, I wanted to stay home with my mom, and go locally in the place I was raised. I applied to Ivy Tech without my parents' knowledge, hoping I wouldn't have to leave for a distant college. My father won the decision because he held the money card; I was to attend a distant university and "truly experience life" away from either parent, as he put it. It wasn't much of a choice for me; it was stay living with newlyweds and undertake the difficult task of paying for school myself, or go to the unknown on my father's wallet. I have five older brothers, the closest to me in age is three years my senior, Jason. When I entered college as a freshman, Jason was a senior. Knowing that I didn't want to leave home, he encouraged me to attend the same college that he was studying at, which was Purdue University. I had visited Greg at Purdue several times throughout my senior year of high school, so I somewhat knew my way around campus. Greg went with me to each advisor meeting, campus tour, and application and loan office appointment. Neither parent ever accompanied me; maybe it's because they were tired of my complaints and protests of the school choice. After a few visits to Purdue to get ready for the school year, I got to know my brother's roommates and some of his other friends.

The summer before my freshman year Jason attended my freshman orientation with me, which we promptly ditched so he could expose me to the more important things that Lafayette, Indiana had to offer: Carter's hot dogs. The best hot dog one will ever eat between the hours of midnight and four a.m. – which wasn't even a restaurant, it was just a Mexican guy who could have possibly been named Carter with a wobbly hot dog cart. He introduced me to "Happy Friday Guy", this loony-toon that wore an outfit of all spandex, complete with cape and mask. Happy Friday Guy rode around campus each Friday on a Razor scooter, wishing us all a 'good Friday'. He showed me the best study lounges that only students in the honors college had access to, and introduced me to his favorite professors. When Jason couldn't show me around, his friends ended up taking me out to lunch, and spending time escorting me around campus. Jason made each of my visits as welcoming as possible, always making sure he or someone else had time to spend with me.

The weekend I left for college, my mom went on vacation with her new husband. If they'd been ready for me to move out, they'd made the statement loudly. I packed my two-door Grand Am by myself, and considered not leaving the house at all. Since my parents weren't seeing me off to my new home, my cousin and best friend, Luke, was going to drive to Lafayette separately as soon as he finished his work day. I remember idling in my driveway for a few minutes, weighing the options of staying or leaving. I was eighteen, and eighteen year-olds are supposed to be overjoyed at leaving their parents homes for a rule-free environment. I didn't do well with being

in unfamiliar places, and even though my home life wasn't all that great I at least knew what to expect. I needed the familiarity in my life—my friends, my hangouts, my room. There are few things I value more than stability, and this move was forcing me to adapt, to change myself.

The three hour drive to Lafayette was long enough for me to begin to panic, but not long enough for me to calm myself down. I began to realize that even though Luke was helping me move in, he'd be leaving to go back home at the end of the weekend. Purdue held none of the friends I'd attached myself to after the divorce. When I arrived in Lafayette, my pulse got out of control. I drove white-knuckled straight past the campus and went straight to my brother's house. I sat idling in my car, reflecting on how once again, I didn't want to leave the drive-way. I could see Jason looking out the window at me, waiting for me to come in. I left everything in the car and walked into his house like I was just dropping by. I didn't expect the reception I received at the door-- I was promptly bear-hugged by my brother and his roommates; I've never felt so welcome. I felt relieved because they were like family to each other, and they were so hospitable to me. At least my new home had people that were excited to see me arrive, it helped lessen the homesickness.

When Luke arrived at Jason's house, he was the crutch I needed to get through the day. He made it feel like we were on one of our crazy adventures that we'd be laughing about over coffee the next morning. He was much more excited about the prospect of college life than I was; and he was able to bring out my positivity. We crammed into my Grand Am and started the drive to campus. Many of Lafayette's houses are rented out to older students, and on the move-in weekends in August there are house parties everywhere. Along the way, there was a house on the corner opposite from my dorm where there was a kegger going on-- apparently in the front yard. Two kids were passed out in the lawn, and the people still able to function were playing bean bags. One intoxicated individual was running up and down the sidewalk, short a shirt and plus an orange sombrero, and he held a sign that read, "freshman daughter drop-off". I sat in the backseat, freaking out: I come from a Christian school. I come from a Christian church. I wear clothing out in public, and I don't run around half naked with alcohol in my hands in blatant view of passing cars. Luke was smiling all the way up to his eyes (a phrase my Grandma uses); he thought it was paradise, and I thought I was in over my head. If my dad had seen the 'freshman daughter drop-off' sign, he would've turned the car around and I'd be out of a room and board deposit. It was always other people's actions that repulsed him; not his own.

Jason drove my car around the side of my dorm's parking lot, trying to find a space. I was in shock: there were people unloading U-hauls! I still don't know how those girls fit an entire U-haul of belongings into a 16x18 dorm room. We found my RA (Resident Aid) taping boxes for some other family, and he informed me that my room was on the eighth floor, and that the elevator only goes up to the fifth. I was in one of the dorm buildings on campus without air-conditioning. It was in the middle of August, 90 degrees and boiling

and I was so thankful I had packed lightly. Walking up eight flights of stairs to find my room made my calves burn; doing it several times I thought I was going to tear a muscle. Having two able-bodied guys to help carry my belongings was the best two things I'd brought with me to school.

I am a shy individual, and nothing made me more nervous than meeting my new roommate. I'd had to go potluck, so based upon a short survey of my smoking and sleeping preferences the school had assigned one to me. When I found my dorm room my roommate Tiffany was already in there, decorating her half of the room. She had a box full of strange looking apparatuses, and the first words she spoke to me were, "Do you have any ceiling hooks?"

Tiffany had long, dirty dishwater blonde hair and pale skin. She was about sixty pounds overweight, but that didn't steer her from wearing clothing that would fit someone half her size. She had on a mini-skirt that clearly displayed her underwear, and nothing under her v-neck tank. I felt uncomfortable by just looking at her, but there was no good way to avert my eyes without being even more obvious. My mom would've locked me in my room if I'd ever tried to leave my house wearing a similar outfit—I was raised to present myself *as a lady*. I didn't fit in here. These teenagers…they had no respect for themselves, no discretion on their choice of clothing, or how others perceived them. They had no restrictions. My balloon life hadn't included any of the promiscuity I was witnessing.

I tried to make small talk to overcome my repulsion.

"What's that black stick for?"

"That's my whip."

"You're whip…what do you need a whip-" and I stopped short. I know my face must have lost all color because I don't think my heart continued its normal pace.

"I want to hang it from the ceiling over my bed. I know I brought ceiling hooks I just can't remember which box I put them in." She started opening another box by ripping the scotch tape off the top, and rummaging around.

"What else are you hanging from the ceiling…?" I eyed the black whip. It was leather. It looked old.

"A bunch of my other toys, like my handcuffs, I want them right over my bed so guys can walk in and see them." She looked at me with a face of pure excitement and pride, and her eyes got really wide. "There's a bunch of hot guys that are moving in on the first floor, and I asked them to come help us move our beds around. Oh my God, we're going to have like THE best room. Do you mind guys sleeping in here with us? I mean, if you're not doing homework."

"I guess not." I had a ball in my throat the size of a watermelon. Jason and Luke finally came in behind me when they found my room, and I hurriedly put the boxes they were carrying in the corner and lead them out. I needed oxygen, and I needed to get outside and away from my dorm room with the sex freak. Jason and Luke were lagging behind me, having a fine time checking out all the new freshman girls on my floor. I was the only one in a panic, trying to remain calm and

not call my mom and ask to come home.

"I'm not staying in there!" I screamed when we got outside. It felt like I'd held my breath the entire eight stories down. I felt so small, so out of place.

"Why not? The no AC thing isn't so bad, once it gets a bit later on in the year. Just open the windows." Jason wasn't even looking at me as he talked; he was eyeing a blonde trying to pry a box out of her backseat across the parking lot.

"My roommate is a FREAK. She's hanging her sex toys from the ceiling! I can't live with her. I'm staying with you!" I gave him my most desperate eyes and sad lip.

He just laughed. I was stuck here and no one really seemed too interested in what I actually wanted. I wanted to go home; stay in my own room with my own normal bedroom surroundings. I had a bookshelf, a desk, and a fish tank. Normal. Tiffany had KY jelly and a whip and who knows what else.

We started heading back to the parking lot through the first floor lounge when we found the make-shift water park. The first floor guys had somehow rigged a hose to the study lounge water fountain, and had a slip-and-slide going from the front door down into the lawn. Luke yelled out and took about half a second to rip his shirt off and toss it at some passing girl and he was diving down the slide.

"This is what you've been doing here, the last three years?" I asked Jason as we watched Luke pulling some poor girl down the slide with him.

"Oh yeah! Lighten up, Jen. Try to have some fun here while you're away from Mom and Dad for once. Being away from them will be good for you. This is going to be the best four years of your life."

Some shoeless student approached me and wrapped his arm around my waist like it belonged there.

"So what floor do you live on?"

"Um, the third." I lied flatly.

"Great. I'll have to come…check out your room later." He smiled at me and walked away, letting his arm slide across my back.

I gave my brother a look and threw my hands in the air. He hadn't so much as flinched. I let out a breath and gave him a defeated stare, and he laughed again. He really wasn't going to intervene in anything.

"Okay, stay at my house as long as you want." He put his arm around my shoulder, and we walked back to my car, letting Luke have a few more minutes of college dorm life.

The following week I stayed at Jason's house. Luke went back home after the weekend, but he assured me he'd visit soon. I didn't return to my dorm except for a change of clothes or a shower, and I tried my best to go at hours during the day when I hoped Tiffany would be out. I was still not ready to adjust to this crazy lifestyle that I'd been thrown into. College had no restrictions—I could do whatever I wanted, and not even my brother was going to reprimand me for it. In fact, he encouraged me to let loose a little and stop trying to live like I was still under our parent's roof. I was confused, we'd been raised in the same house with the same upbringing, and during his college years he'd become a completely different person. Truth was, I

liked the person he'd become—he was more accepting of others, more open to different perspectives and he seemed to be involved in very different social circles all over campus.

The weekend before classes began, my brother's housemates threw a 'beginning of the year' party. Many of the houses around the block were doing the same, and Jason and I wandered around from house to house, stopping at different parties so he could introduce me to a few other kids he knew. He said I needed to learn that an aspect of college life included being social; he wanted me to make my own friends instead of being shy and hiding at his house. I wasn't exactly sure that it was okay to walk into a stranger's house just because there was a party going on, but the rest of the students seemed to share his views. One party we stopped at, a kid had an alligator in his room. A real, live alligator named The General—I didn't know it was legal to own a wild creature like an alligator, but he said he'd ordered it off Ebay. I was so intrigued that I had Jason take a picture of me kissing The General, who was still a harmless baby and only about a foot long. My most memorable college moment to date was kissing a reptile.

As we walked from house to house, I met a lot of freshman who seemed just as in shock about the atmosphere as I did. I could pick them out fairly easily—they were the quiet kids standing in the room with the most excitement, just drinking their cocktails via straw and watching the older peers. I was not alone. One girl that I met actually lived in my dorm, just on a different floor. I liked her; she was an architecture major and not much for the party scene either, just trying to get to know people. We agreed to meet up later in the week for lunch. Jason seemed satisfied that I'd made social progress on our trip, so when he and I left the last house on the list of stops, he walked me back to my dorm. It was around 3 a.m.

Jason wanted me to try sleeping in my own room; I'm sure he was getting impatient with me being his constant shadow. He said goodnight to me at my elevator, and started his walk back to his house where there was still a party going on. I walked into my building and gave my student ID to the dorm manager who checks students in after 12 a.m. He informed me that the elevator shuts down after midnight, and that I'd have to walk up the eight flights of stairs to my room. I whined a little bit to him, explaining that I'd been walking around town all evening and my legs weren't going to make it up eight flights of stairs. I don't think he felt sorry for me being out partying.

I started the journey up monotonous tiles of steps, and discovered a new pair of panties on each floor, just laying in plain view. Like a bunch of people had stripped in the stairwell and had managed to pick up all of their clothes but their underwear. There were red thongs, white lace underwear, and some red and blue plaid boxers. I made it to the third floor and leaned on the wall for a breather to rest my burning calf muscles. I hadn't drank much, but I started feeling the gin and tonics I'd had earlier. I stopped to listen when I heard music floating into the stairwell through the open doors that led into the hallway of the third floor. It was Kenny Chesney's "No shirt, No Shoes, No

Problem". I couldn't contain my curiosity; I decided to explore who was playing music loud enough for me to hear it in the stairwell at this ungodly hour. Maybe the gin prodded my sense of adventure, or maybe it was that I'd kissed an alligator.

I stepped into the dimly lit hallway and noticed the floor's bathroom door was propped open by a wooden block, and a black hose ran along the floor coming out of the bathroom. This must be a guy's floor, because no girl would have brought a hose to college, and if she did she wouldn't know how to rig it to a faucet. I followed the hose down the hallway of closed bedroom doors until I found the one that was slightly opened to fit the hose coming through the doorway; it was also the source of the Kenny Chesney music. I pushed the door open further: the hose led to two guys in floppy ivory sun hats sitting in a hot pink blow-up kiddy-pool enjoying Corona's.

"What the hell?" I couldn't hold back my language or laughter. College was getting ridiculous.

"Hey! Our first guest! Grab a beer and hop in!" They immediately started moving towards the opposite end of the pool to make room for me. I stepped closer and found that they weren't even in bathing suits—but boxers. They even had a sand bucket, complete with beach toys like a shovel. They must've had Kenny Chesney on repeat, because "Keg in the Closet" started playing. I looked around at their room: one had pictures of him and some girl I presumed to be his girlfriend covering his entire desk, and the other had posters of Cub's players on his end. I am a diehard White Sox fan. Rivalry rose up in me. I hesitated, as they introduced themselves as Nathan and Phil, and they were from some town I'd never heard of outside Indianapolis. I saw something neon yellow at the bottom of the kiddy-pool: a squirt gun. These were my kind of people.

We were all students with no supervision. Up until this point, I'd been used to my restrictions and college was quickly testing my rigid upbringing. If Jason were here, he would be chatting away about baseball to these strangers. Since my brother was the only person who'd helped move me in, adjust, and get to know my new home --and not my parents who should have had that responsibility, I made the choice to let go. My parents had raised me by restrictions and religious rules; Jason let me experience life for myself while still providing the company of the older-brother I needed. And right now, the unknown didn't seem so bad. My brother had developed as person through his experiences here, and he was still the brother I knew and loved. I used that as my reason; even if it wasn't necessarily the smartest one. I took another few steps into the room, and Nathan smiled at me. The world was not something to hide from; I was exposed to it and still the same person. I stripped down to my bra and underwear and grabbed myself two Corona's and a Yankee's hat I found on Phil's side of the room. The pool felt so refreshing and cool! My balloon life imploded. I'd made new friends in a completely unconventional manner and it felt energizing to live outside those restrictions. I let myself relax, and laid my head back on the wall of the pool and felt content.

Our building didn't have air conditioning and this was the best idea I'd seen yet to combat the

August temperature. I introduced myself as a girl from the southwest Indiana area that came from a private Christian school system, and both guys started laughing.

"You're with us pagans at a public university now, and we'll teach you all you need to know. Cheers!" Nathan tipped his beer at me and winked. They didn't care that I was different, they embraced it, and I felt better than I had all week. I informed them of my intimate moment with an alligator earlier that evening. I found myself laughing; I started to let go of my restrictive nature, my parent's nature. I'd had no idea what I'd been missing until my parents practically threw me out the door with a check addressed to Purdue University. I picked up the squirt gun at the bottom of the pool and challenged them to a fight. I presumed Nathan was getting out of the way when he got out of the pool, dripping water all over the carpet floor and went to his closet…but then he pulled out a Supersoaker from the top shelf. My jaw dropped, and I started yelling, "NO FAIR!" and grabbed the sand bucket, filled it with water and began throwing buckets of cold water in his direction.

The water fight continued down the hallway and into the bathroom, water was spilled everywhere. I remember trying to run away from the stream of the Supersoaker and tripping, flying forward into some poor sleeping person's closed bedroom door. I lost all self-control, I had no regard for the amount of water we were wasting, the damage we were doing to the room or to the carpet. I was having the time of my life with two people I'd just met, soaked to the core with a bruise of my head from colliding with the sink in the bathroom. I called out that I surrendered; I was too exhausted to run away anymore and I realized I was in my bra and underwear in the middle of the hallway on an all-guys floor. We regathered in the depleted pool and started filling it up again, and tried to lie down as best we could in the restrictive space. I put the Yankees hat over my face and lay with my head back, too tired to move.

When the dorm manager got calls about noise complaints on the third floor, he found the three of us in the hot pink kiddy-pool, drunk and singing at the top of our lungs to Kenny Chesney's "When the Sun Goes Down". The manager confiscated our beer, and made us dump out the pool. I tried to walk the rest of the five floors to my room, but only made it to the 6th before I gave up and called Tiffany to come and get me. She found me in the stairwell, leaning against the wall in my soaked clothing. She grabbed my arms and lifted me up the next two flights of stairs, us laughing the whole way as I told her I'd kissed an alligator and I was all wet because I'd been swimming in some guys' dorm room. She made a remark about not knowing that I was this crazy. I slept what was left of the night in my own bed, next to Tiffany's.

The End

Certain Kind of Woman

Caitlin Ryder

If I get old, I will not give in
But if I do, remind me of this.
Remind me that once I was free,
Once I was cool, once I was me.
—Radiohead, A Reminder

It's funny how much you learn about a person after they die. It's even funnier how much you learn about yourself from them. I was a junior in high school when I lost my grandma. I was 17 and I hadn't known the "Anna Banana," the spitfire everyone else spoke of with such vigor. This woman who had collected enough people to pack a funeral home.

My memories of her are vivid and aged. All her blue maintained.

My earliest memories of her are techno-colored. Her laugh rumbling and spirited, beating her grandchildren at Rummy with no shred, no inclination of remorse.

As I stretched up in character and stature, I knew the scared grandma, calling my parents and the cops at 4 a.m. because there were spirits in her house. I knew the grandma who lost her laugh to dementia, who hoarded boxes of antiques for comfort, who pounded holes into her walls and poured bleach in the basement to kill those "pesky ghosts." I knew the devastation of convincing my father to videotape her empty house, failing to find any trace of what haunted her. I learned that there could be a collection of anything, regardless what it was. I learned love lasted long after the ground settled around the bones of the dead.

When I was old enough to understand real things, real tragedies, I heard about my uncles. My parents used to send me to grandma's house because they knew something I didn't: she would be gone one day, and I would have deep holes where memories didn't fit. Her long fingers and crisp nails projected diamonds and stones, her white hair cut short, and her Vera scarf set at her neck, she was a vision of what a woman used to be.

As we sat in her kitchen surrounded by the collections of salt and pepper shakers and lunch boxes, her hands dissected each piece of pomegranate. The juice crept through the lines in my lips, staining my mouth red. My cheeks tainted the same color; she would be left without a trace. The sweetness of the fruit echoed a happiness, cluttering in my heart.

Her hands, her face, crumbling into each other, fading away.

When she told me about Martin, her voice left the kitchen, her eyes went somewhere I wasn't allowed to follow. It wasn't that she told the story many times; she didn't need to say it at all. Her words broke my childish concepts of family and

comfort, disturbing my tide pools and reefs. Martin loved one of my grandma's purple dresses. One random day, he asked her to wear it because she looked so lovely when she did. My grandma's voice would hold for a brief moment. A breath waiting to see if this story, these memories, could change. If somehow the end wasn't the end at all, it was just something forgotten. A week later my grandma wore that same purple dress to his funeral. Martin was eight years old when he died from polio. He was the first child she had to bury. My dad remembers grandma saying that no one would come by the house after he passed away, scared that they would catch the same fate.

Uncle Tommy was the second child to crumble, the third born. He was 21 when he fell asleep driving home. When his car crashed, he flew through the windshield breaking his neck on a tree. All that is left are Tommy's letters, a few pictures, and his resemblance in my father's features. Grandpa was diagnosed with cancer shortly before, which would slowly break him apart from over the next six years. Dad would sit outside his parent's bedroom at night making sure he could hear his father's even breaths. Losing two sons broke my grandfather, diminishing his valor to hurtle waves called leukemia.

These stories stayed with me as I grew up. Grandma slowly started turning into someone I didn't fully recognize. When Aunt Martyna died, dad was the one to tell grandma. This would be the third child, the fourth family member, she would bury. Dementia took away the woman her family knew, that her children accepted. My grandma was still feisty; she tried on several occasions to escape from the nursing home. This was different. Martyna passed away in November from a massive stroke brought on by cancer. She was the first born out of eight kids, the favorite of both parents, the one who had gotten their attention.

Those tired eyes, that burrowed twinge, lines and craters shaped from dismay.

The day he told her, dad and I were supposed to take grandma downstairs for an event at the nursing home. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to act like everything was okay, that someone who fought cancer, who had beaten it for years, was stolen by a relapse. Grandma was wrapped up tightly in a blanket the Girl Scouts had made the nursing home residents. Her fragile body radiated with pain so deep that it froze me. Her cries echoed through the room. I remember thinking about that stupid large tiger on the fleece blanket, the tight knots on the ends where the two sides connected. I wanted to slip between and give her my warmth, lend her any strength I could conjure. My dad said things to her, sincere words, but they made no difference to the walls crumbling, the Kleenex clamped between her hands, the tears soaking through her pillowcase.

We left grandma to remember those first steps, her husband's gorgeous smile, that purple dress. My dad told me to wait downstairs. As the residents and their families went into the dining area, I stowed my tears away inside my gloves.

Ann passed away that following April, surrounded by her kids. I've heard many versions of the days before she passed: she talked to grandpa, she waited to pass until my Uncle Randy joined her other children around her bedside. When dad came home and told us she was gone, I knew my tears were meaningless, they were selfish, but like a tidal wave, I withdrew, I let go.

My father and I began to mourn the only familiar way we knew how: to create. He would sit alone, strumming his chords, and I would scribble words together. We were playing the same melody, so full and rich like frosting. Our words didn't match, our tunes altered, but our grief harmonized.

You sleep now, card player, your worries have run astray.

At her funeral, I sat surrounded by people I didn't know. These people weren't sad, they were laughing, they were touching and embracing and sharing. There was a plastic covered couch in the corner, puke pink and perfectly plush. On a small television next to the couch played a videotape in loop. There were faces that I haven't seen in years and some never seen at all. There was a blur of faces, of smiles, of loud Irish chatting. I must be only a year old in it, bouncing proudly on grandma's wide-set hips.

All I have are stories now; I have pictures and boxes of trinkets grandma loved. But I don't have her spirit. Her heartbreak changed me; it changed my definition of love, of loss, of being a woman, of being a mother. Grandma was not perfect, but she was strong and she carried a voice in a time when she should have collapsed. My mom once told me she believed grandma died from heartache. Losing a first born was just too much for any mother to handle.

On the day we laid her to rest, I visited two uncles and a grandfather I never had the chance to meet. I met my family. I stood examining the flat grave markers, as the bitter April whipped around and chilled my heated cheeks. My fingers grazed each carved letter, collecting any piece, any trace, I could. Grandma never remarried after she lost grandpa to the current. She would say that "He was it for me the first time I saw him. Nothing and no one is changing that." She raised the rest of her four kids without him. On the day of his funeral, their house was robbed. Many of the rare coins they were going to sell to make ends meet were taken. She worked two jobs to support her family.

I stood there, my ego dripping off my cheeks, soaking into my jacket. There was a deep acidic voice doubting my strength. I was orphaned of a woman whom I didn't fully know, but who had suffered this last death privately. I openly wept, while she had held her sobs unruffled inside her collection basket.

Losing my grandma exposed me to love; it showed me the tides, the crests, the waves. When I turned 19, I got the saying "Soulmates never die" tattooed across the back of my neck. I connected the two words because there is no room for a space, for any hesitation. A soulmate isn't just a lover; it

can be a best friend, a child. Grandma mourned the loss of four soulmates.

There are lessons we are supposed to learn throughout life. Some hurt more to learn than others. When there is love, there is also grief. Neither one triumphs the other; they are intertwined in fate. To experience happiness, you have to experience the opposite. These two things let in a glimpse of something bigger, an untouchable truth, a wisdom. Seeing someone pass away helps establish a larger context. We are not floating in space, we are galaxies, we are stars, touching hands in the night skies. We are grainy pebbles attached to the ebbs and flows of the water. Yet, we are still connected to each other. That in itself makes us significant.

My grandma is still very much in my life. Her wedding picture sits on my shelf, a constant reminder that I have come from generations of love. I am not just myself; I am a summation of my ancestors flowing in and out of my veins, my lungs, my heart.

The End

Photo by Sarah Wachowski

Dear Jason and Justin

Heather McCaslin

I sigh. It's the third time this week I've come over to watch a movie with my boyfriend and his grandma. Justin is sprawled out on the couch, his head on my lap. He chuckles at Will Ferrell's slapstick comedy booming from the home-made surround sound system, complete with two ten-amp subwoofers. If we are watching flicks with his grandma, we follow a certain routine. Her cheeks beam bright red during more explicit scenes that are so common in modern cinema and she scowls throughout most dramas. Safe, lighthearted comedies have become the norm.

I almost jump out of my skin! An explosion emitting from the speakers wakes me from my zombie-like trance. Justin looks up at me. I think that maybe he can hear my heart beating as loudly as I can. He says with a grin, "I don't think it's loud enough." He barely gets the words out before another gigantic boom. There's rattling above me. As I peer up, I notice the frame containing the lakeshore picture rattling against the baby blue wall. Above his grandma's recliner was a smaller frame holding a picture of Justin's father. Previously, it had been completely level. Now, it looked like it had shifted 30 degrees. The imperfection bothers me, but I don't want to disturb Justin's comfort, so I put it out of my mind.

I let out a yawn and do a stretch that could rival a lion's in the morning. The movie is finally over and the music blares while the credits stream. Justin pops up off the couch to shut down the system and relinquish the 54 inch screen back to his grandma. He catches the end of my yawn and commences stretching his mouth muscles on his own. He stares down at me with his droopy eyes. I can't imagine how tired he must be after such a long couple of days working. I notice the patchy "beard" he is growing out; he blames it on being Polish. He runs his hand through his cropped brown hair and mumbles out a string of words that I just manage to put together as a sentence: "I got somethin' to show you."

I cock my head to the side in interest. "What?" It's a simple and broad response. I know he has no intentions of satisfying me with an answer, but I humor his playfully torturous spirit. "What? What? What? What?" I sound like a broken record, but continue asking until he physically pulls me up from the couch. I go limp to make his task more difficult so he resorts to supporting both our weights in a bear hug. Refusal to cooperate is my source of enjoyment. Still, Justin isn't fazed by my resiliance. It's as if he transforms into He-Man and thrusts my entire body over his left shoulder. I let out a shriek like a damsel in distress. I faintly hear his grandma suppress a giggle. He turns his voice down to macho-mode and bellows about his

superhuman strength while carrying me down the narrow hall.

I'm kicking my legs and reaching for his briefs. If I can just get a hold of those Hanes, I'll be able to distract him with a wedgie so I can plan my next mode of attack. I am unsuccessful, though. He knows my defense too well by now and can position me just out of reach. I give up and just enjoy the chauffeur service to his room. "Alright, Hulk, what's the big secret?" By now, I'm out of ideas of what it can be he has to show me. With the wonderful world of texting and picture messaging, we share new and exciting information with each other instantaneously. What could he have found that he didn't want to tell me about right away? We're finally at the low doorway to his room.

I exhale. The pressure on my abdomen dispells as he gently puts me back on the ground, and lets gravity do its job. I expect a playful smile and a kiss as usual after this common show of power. To my surprise, however, my feet barely have time to hit the hardwood and he is already off sifting through his filing cabinet.

The picture frame on top topples over as Justin jars the middle drawer open. He doesn't seem to notice. It's the only picture of Justin's mom in the entire house. It's a candid of her laughing at something Justin had just said. She's sitting with him in a restaurant booth. They look so happy in it; having fun at a party long before I came along. I wonder how long it's been since they've held a conversation longer than five minutes without getting into a meaningless fight.

"I've been waiting to show you this." He pulls out two sheets of paper stapled together. Holding it to his chest, he stares at me earnestly. "You know I love you. It's really important to me that you read this."

I don't know how I know what it is, but I know.

I walk over and sit on top of the fluffy down comforter. The smiles have dissipated from both our faces. He sees the distress in my face.

"It's OK," he assures, "I really need you to do this for me."

I slip the paper from his hands and hold it delicately in my own. It's typed. A bit impersonal, I think to myself, but I read silently. Because it confirmed my certainty of the contents of the letter, I'll never forget the opening sentence:

Dear Jason and Justin,

I'm sorry to put you boys through this, but I've become an empty shell of the person I used to be.

I get goosebumps. Justin notices immediately and tries to smooth my skin back down on my arm. It doesn't work.

My hands start to shake. I don't want the responsibility of this knowledge. I'm happy in my own ignorant world just having Justin for who he is, waiting for that pivotal and "perfect" moment in which I can confess my love for him.

I stare at the paper blankly. I am obligated to read on. Justin needs this from me. He hasn't asked me to do anything bearing any sort of magnitude

before now. I owe it to him to at least read the letter.

I steady myself. My goosebumps fade and my mind unjumbles. The color comes back to my pale face and my hands stop shaking. There are only three very short opening paragraphs. The letter, despite its great emotional importance, is very formal. It is as if it's written by a scholar or a businessman. The third paragraph was only to set up a bulleted list of key points.

There are a few things that I want you boys to know. If I haven't done anything else for you, I want to at least do this.

I am reading a pamphlet. That is how it seems anyways. It is like a guide to success.

- *Graduate college*
- *Work odd jobs often while in school for the experience*
- *Avoid drugs and alcohol in excess*
- *Wait until you are at least 25 to have a baby*
- *Date at least 50 women to figure out what it actually is that you want*
- *Take care of your body because you'll need it*
- *Save more money than you spend*

I am… confused. Am I reading what I'm supposed to be reading? So far this is sounding less and less like a goodbye and more like a PSA. There are at least 15 bulleted points on here, some with longer explanations than the others. All of them make very solid, legitimate points, but I'm still taken aback because of the style in which this letter is written. It's superficial and non intrusive; the complete opposite of what I expect a loved one's final goodbye to be.

I am on the concluding paragraphs. The bullet points are wrapped up nicely in a couple concluding sentences. I suppose if the boys had questions, they were expected to reference the concluding sentences and skim right on up to the point that was made.

How fucking practical.

I commence with the final thoughts. At first, I am drawn in, but by the end of it, I am feeling just as disassociated as before.

Don't feel sorry for me, and don't think about this. I've lost the person I used to be. The money I left will be enough to get each of you through school. You should both read this at least once a year to remind yourselves of what it takes to live successfully.

I am shaking in frustration. At least the closing is hand written. The only manuscript on the whole letter is simply, "Love, Dad."

I start to cry. Justin wraps his arms around me. "Don't cry. This wasn't meant to make you cry. Obviously, I didn't follow all the things on that list of his, but I wanted you to know why I am the person I am today. What he did makes me… me."

I am not crying because I am sad. I am crying out of frustration! His dad not only took the coward's way out of life and committed suicide, but he made absolutely no attempt to connect emotionally with his sons on the last words they would ever read by him. How pitiful is that? *Here, guys. Take this typed guide to success while I off myself.* That's basically what it was. Why didn't he write it out long-hand?

Why didn't he say just how much he loved them? Why didn't he recall an event that involved each of his sons in a loving memory?

I am enraged at this bullshit, but continue to cry. Justin thinks I am touched by the letter. I find no reason to shatter his thoughts with angry questions. I just let him hold and rock me and try to console my troubled soul.

I dry my eyes and lie down on top of the comforter. Justin strokes my hair. I don't realize that he is trying to grab the paper from my death-grip so he can put it back in the filing cabinet. He gently lifts my thumb a bit to rouse my attention and I let go. There are now crinkles on either side where I held the previously pristine piece of paper. Although he is across the room putting the letter away, I have never felt closer to a human being. I know how much he cares about me, and how connected he feels with me. I love him, and I'm finally able to tell him so.

Even though it's now out in the open, I don't even acknowledge its magnitude. There's something else clouding my brain now; something so much more terrifying than abstract emotions. All I can think about is finding him like they found his dad; in the middle of a forest preserve, 9mm next to his lifeless body. How can I possibly think this could ever happen? It must be the statistics. "30% of suicide victims are children who suffered losing a parent to suicide." Where did I hear that? I can't even give it credibility, but still…

I can't help myself. I roll over, wiping a sheet of water from my eyes. My voice squeaks and cracks as the words fly out before I even think to filter them. "You need to promise me something here and now."

He stops moving his hand up and down my shoulder and stares into my red, puffy eyes. "What's up, babe?"

Immediately, I want to take those words back. I can't possibly say this out loud. No, I have to do this if I ever want to sleep again. "You need to promise me—promise me that no matter what happens, you can not do that to yourself. No matter what happens…"

He nods, but this just doesn't do it for me.

"Promise me, Justin!"

"I promise." He grips me tight. Once again, I feel at peace. Not more than two minutes later, I fall asleep, content with the knowledge that the love of my life will never become an empty shell.

The End

Neighborhood War

Robert J. Gonzalez

The statement "Boy will be boys" is clearly an understatement of my childhood. In my case I think it should be more like "Boys will be monsters." I think of my child hood and my neighborhood friends and can't help but think of some of the best times we had together. Every summer for as long as I could remember the guys I have grown up with had so many activities we were into. Whether it was playing video games, shooting each other with air-soft guns, firework fights, riding bikes across town for no apparent reason, or whatever the case, the list goes on and on.

The area where we lived in was in the shape of a giant oval. From an aerial view it would look like an oval with a factory to the right of it. The division between the houses and factory was like a pathway that went on for about three miles, filled with weeds, trees and high grass. So in my case instead of having allies like the rest of the neighborhood, we had a little section of high brush that separated our houses from the factory. Its width was about as long as a bus, so it looked like one big trail that consisted of houses on one side and the factory on the other side. At the bottom of the oval was another block that was a regular street and on the left of the oval a school and track.

The neighbors and I grew up together starting at a very young age. The neighborhood was in full force by the time I was seven. It felt like every year more kids moved in which was fine with all of us... we just saw it as having more kids to play with. The neighborhood was primarily boys, which was good because we played sports and were very physical, especially when we all were around the ten-year-old range. That is when we started riding bikes different places, and we just were ready to have a good time and play outside every day after school.

One Saturday afternoon a few of the guys from my block were walking along the divisional path. As we continued to walk along this path, or as we called it the "back roads," one of the guys walking decided to be a comedian. He picked up a berry and tossed it at one of the other guys. I picked up some and tossed a handful of berries at him. That very instant we created a game amongst ourselves. We all took our separate battle stations and it was a free-for-all, pelting each other with berry after berry. It started with berries and it ended up with golf ball-sized apples. They didn't hurt that much on contact, and it was all in good fun. Our battle ceased but the bigger one hadn't officially even begun.

We continue down the back road, and it just so happened one of my friends that came along for the walk with us, Kenny, kept a few apples in his pocket for whatever reason. As we were walking toward the neighborhood that was directly next to ours, he saw a group of guys playing basketball. We

all knew the guys, but at the time they didn't see us because they were so into their game. Kenny looked over at us and said, "Hey, guys, watch this," and threw an apple, a hail-mary type pass into a group of the other neighborhood kids, and it exploded on the ground right next to them. The five other guys from the neighborhood near the blast all looked toward our way and yelled hysterically. Kenny threw another one and we all laughed, exchanged some kid insults and gestures, and we were on our way back to our neighborhood. Since by this time it was already dusk, we were out of things to do, so we went inside a friend's house to play some video games for the evening. We called it a night and we all went out separate ways, not knowing what was going to happen the next day.

A few of us woke up early on Sunday morning, we decided to head to McDonald's on our bikes for some breakfast. We got there pretty quick, sat, ate and chatted for a while before we eventually made our way back. We decided to take the scenic route, so it took a little longer to be on course to make it home at a reasonable time. On the way back we ended up passing our neighborhood friendly foes and it just so happens the same group of kids were outside playing again. We saw them run frantically to the same spot, when all of a sudden we were the ones being bombarded. It seemed as if they had almost expected us to return, we didn't even think they would retaliate, nor did we think about doing it again. Apples the sizes of golf balls were raining in left and right. We all started pedaling rapidly to get out of harm's way. I remember my front wheel being hit with an apple and some juice coming back and hitting me in the face. We all made it back untouched for the most part, but we all knew what we had to do that very instant… strike back.

When we finally made it back to our neighborhood, or as we called it then, "base," we began to recruit some of the other neighborhood guys. In total we ended up having a good solid eight guys ready to counterstrike. We filled them in to what happened to us and how it all began yesterday. We were ready to plan our counterstrike when all of a sudden we see a mob of at least 10 bikes pulling towards our neighborhood. Everyone on the bikes had backpacks on and rode slowly. We knew what was in those bags, and we knew we had to start planning our attack. We all kind of just stood around for a moment and then we went into one of the guy's backyards to hide out. Our other neighborhood nemeses knew that they wouldn't be able to get into the backyard, so they took off back towards their block in hopes to catch us off guard at a later time. Little did they know we were thinking of a master plan to not only retaliate but to keep them off of this game that had been created by accident, we wanted to let them know that war games were our specialty and defeat was not an option.

At that time we happened to be in our walkie-talkie phase, so what better time to put them to use. All of the guys had one but we wouldn't need that many, we just needed two of them with the best

range. We split ourselves up, team A and team B, both equipped with a radio. We knew that one team would strike from one side and the other team would get the other side. One of the guys named Jake suggested we put all of our apples in backpacks like they did so we could get as many throws as we could for our troubles. Everyone went home, got their backpacks, and we all then went into my backyard and got apples, seeing as I had an apple tree with tons of apples on the ground. Everyone filled up, and we then went back to plan a little more to make sure we had all bases covered.

I would be a part of team B, we were the team coming from the back roads and team A was coming from the main street. The attack would take place at around 3 o'clock, and it couldn't come any sooner. Before we all took off I suggested we put on sweat pants and sweatshirts to have some insulation in case we were hit back. My logic was at least some of the pain would be alleviated with the extra cover. So we came back to our designated rendezvous point and it was about time to head to battle with our neighbors from the other side.

I gathered my group and we made our way back towards the back roads. Since both teams A and B were on foot, we had to leave a little bit before team A since our route was a bit more obstacle-filled. We walked and walked, blending in with our surroundings so we couldn't be seen coming a mile away. We finally had made it to our hiding spot and had a clear view of our neighborhood foes. We radioed in to the other team and told them what we saw. "Alright guys, we have 7 targets, they are all playing basketball and they have ammo very close to them." Team A radioed back "We are in position, and ready when you are."

We made our approach and, our primary objective was to go in as far as we could without being discovered. We crouch our walk in the block, hiding behind cars and trees on our way to the target. We eventually were within striking distance. Team A was still at the hidden location, awaiting for us to strike so they could come in and provide backup and a surprise element to the attack.

The first apples were thrown and as we expected we caught them off guard, they didn't know what had hit them. They instantly ran over to their stash of apple and start to fire back. Since there was more of them for that instant our reinforcements had came catching them even more off guard. At this time the battle had moved to the street as we expected it would. With our team A coming in they were shocked and didn't know what to do. We had them out manned by one and had them off guard for sure. Apples flew everywhere, under cars, on people's lawns and everywhere along the block you couldn't go five feet without seeing an apple.

The war continued, all of us were laughing having a good time. Apples keep flying and I know I got hit with a couple body shots. The hits felt like nothing more than bee stings. So I didn't mind taking a couple shots, but bobbing and weaving skills were in full effect for all of us. After a good solid fifteen to twenty minutes of apple wars, the

battle was winding down. We all began to slow down running around had finally taken its toll on everyone, even those with great endurance.

From a distance a sound could be heard, police sirens. None of us stopped throwing apples, we continued our "apple war." Even though the battle had slowed down, we probably didn't pay the sirens any attention because we didn't think we were doing anything wrong. Until that very second when we hear the sirens so close and all of a sudden three cop cars were on the block. Everyone immediately stopped throwing apples and all looked as if they had seen a ghost. One cop got on the megaphone, "Everyone throwing apples get over here now".

We were all in complete shock scared out of our minds. They had us all on the curb, every single one of us sitting down helpless. What we thought was a good time turned out to be bad news for the rest of the older neighbors. I assumed they were concerned for us and didn't want us to get hurt, even though it wasn't anything serious. The cops asked us what we thought we were doing and proceeded to lecture us for a solid 20 minutes. We tried to explain to the cops that we were just clowning around and that it was a big game. But of course, nothing we said or did mattered at that time, the cops had made up their minds and had decided what they wanted to do. The good thing that happened after all was that we hadn't damaged anything. We made a mess, yes, a big mess at that, but that was about it. After it was all said and done before telling us to go home, they told us to pick up all the apples we had thrown.

The clean-up process probably took 4 times longer then the actual apple fight. I remember I picked up a good thirty to forty apples myself. I can't imagine how many apples in total were thrown. I do know that we just wanted to pick those apples up and be on our way. The police told us to go home after we finished picking up. One cop car out of the three that had come was there to supervise our clean up effort. He watched us and says, "Hey, kids, put a move on it, you're running out of light."

Boys will be boys, not in our case. We had our own ways of having fun. We created games without even trying on so many occasions. Our "apple war" was a good time, nobody took it too serious but people did get hit, bruises and welts were made. We never played that game again, probably because of the danger, and the fact that we didn't want to get into any more trouble at least that way. We were kids then and young boys at that so we did what we did and moved back on to video games.

The End

Sisters

Carrie Cole

The beginning

I used to share a room with my sister when I was younger. That was before we remodeled the house. My sister was three years ahead of me in school, but only two years older than me. My mom always told me because of the birthday cut off she was one of the youngest in her grade and I was one of the oldest in mine, but that doesn't matter much. When I look at pictures of when we were younger I don't know how my parents managed to have us pose together in our strawberry sundresses on my Grandpa's old green couch. Something happened before we reached our teen years that changed everything.

The first memory I have of my sister involves a lock, a dark closet, and a vicious cat named Tigger, that my sister named, who had white and orange soft fur. The closet was in the bedroom we shared together when we were younger. The cat was in the closet with me. And the lock was obviously locked. On the other side of the closet—safe from the vicious cat was my laughing older sister. I don't remember how I got out of that closet. I don't remember if my sister received punishment and I don't remember what I did to deserve getting locked into that closet. I do, however, have a scar on my right eyelid. It's a small scar and no one can notice, but I know it's there because my sister locked me in a closet when I was a kid. I feel like that's the way I should introduce my sister if anyone asks if I have one. "Yeah, she locked me in a closet when I was young with a cat that attacked me and almost took out my right eye. I have a scar. Do you want to see it?" Then they would proceed to get really close to me, but I'll flinch because I don't like people invading my territory.

The gaming years

My sister and I were both extremely into video games, too. This might have been the main turning point in our relationship. My dad would always buy games for us since we were too young to have any real money. One year my dad bought my sister a PlayStation for her birthday, but he said that she would have to share it with me. He was going to buy it for the both of us anyway, but since her birthday was in May and mine was in July, she came first every year. We would share the system though and take turns playing games. Sometimes, but rarely, we'd even play together competition games to see who was better.

My favorite game that my dad bought us was Final Fantasy 8, which came out in 1999 and is impossible to find now for a decent price. Squall Leonhart and Rinoa Heartilly were the main characters of this game. I loved the graphics, although they don't compare to games now. Each

time the Guardian Forces would come out my controller would uncontrollably shake in my hands. Shiva's entrance was the best, in my opinion; the entire screen would turn into a frozen fantasy for her Diamond Dust attack.

Final Fantasy 8 was all about destiny. Rinoa and Squall originally met each other when they shared a dance together in a ballroom. They never exchanged names though and went their separate ways. Rinoa was the princess of a group called the "Forest Owls" and later, she hired a group of SeeD members to help her with a mission. The leader of the group happened to be Squall. The two of them eventually fell in love. When they did I also fell in love with Final Fantasy 8. I could play Final Fantasy 8 over and over again and never touch another game. She never played it.

One day my sister whacked me over the head with a yellow plastic baseball bat we had to play waffle ball with because I was playing a game when she wanted to. She could have just told me.

School years

My sister was in Science Olympiad all throughout her schooling career. She won prizes at the fourth and fifth grade science fairs. I got into a brawl with Samantha Guerrero over McDonald's french-fries so we didn't get to demonstrate our experiment, which one of our dad's thought of. I should mention my sister and I are complete opposites about nearly everything. When we were in elementary up until college she was always "smarter" than me. Whatever that meant. My sister would always get A's in school. I remember I got an F in the first grade on my first ever spelling test. How someone bombs a test with words such as DOOR, CAT, DOG, or LOOK is beyond my comprehension now that I'm in my twenties.

All my teachers would mistakenly call me by my sister's name. I used to correct them in elementary school. "I'm not my sister," I'd squeak at them since I was timid. They would apologize and say how much we looked alike. I don't want to look like my sister. In high school I dyed my hair black so I'd look different. My sister got mad at my mom for letting me dye my hair. Apparently she wanted to color hers.

My family always gossiped about my sister. My uncles and aunts would ask how she was doing in Science Olympiad and they'd all be so interested. My sister also had a talent I could not measure up to. She drew all the time before she dropped out of art school. Everyone would always want her to sketch portraits for them since she was so good at it. Family friends wanted her to come over and paint mosaics and murals on their walls. I couldn't draw.

The only thing I could do better than my sister was sports. My dad played a lot of basketball when he was younger, but he was the shortest kid in his grade so he wasn't taken very seriously. I wanted my dad to take me seriously in something if school wasn't my thing. In the fourth grade I joined a basketball camp so I could learn how to play and

impress my dad someday. I sucked. I also joined a volleyball camp though since that's what everyone else was doing. I was pretty good at volleyball. I liked spiking the ball. I once hit Mrs. Core, our instructor, in the face. I was satisfied. My dad wasn't.

Once I got to middle school I joined every sport I could fit into my schedule. I was running cross-country in the fall and cheerleading. In the winter I played basketball even though I sat on the cold, wooden bench the majority of games. In the spring I ran track. My sister tried to join track once and couldn't even jog an 800. I was jogging four miles a day in middle school, an 800 was nothing. That was the one thing I was better than my sister at.

When I was a freshman in high school my sister was a senior. She told all of her older 17-18 year old friends to harass me. I had older people at school shoving me in the busy hallways. People I didn't even know would make jokes about me being a lesbian or a "poser." I wondered what a poser was. I once had a girl named Megan Johnson stalk me at school and tell me that she wanted to tear my throat out and stomp on it in the hall way. That was lovely considering I never talked to Megan Johnson before in my life or even knew who she was at the time.

My sister also turned my best friend, Staci Stagner, against me. We were friends since elementary school because we were the only two girls on the chess team and were both into the same activities. Staci came over one day to see me, or I thought, but instead went to my sister's room and lingered there the entire day. I didn't know what I did wrong. After a few months Staci started only hanging out with my sister and I was too embarrassed to ask why. Staci later went to a different high school and we talked about getting together a few times and catching up. We never did. Staci goes to the same university now as me, but every time I see her I stare at the ground because of what my sister did.

After my sister graduated high school things got better for me. I didn't join anymore sports. I'm not sure why I didn't. I was good enough. Instead, I got involved with the student government and a program called Natural Helpers. My senior year of high school I was president of our entire class. My teachers still commented on my sister, but not as much. Probably because she was in mostly honors classes. Somehow I always ended up in the classes that the school looked down upon even though I was getting decent grades.

After high school my sister went to an art school in Chicago to pursue her ambitions—we thought—of working for Disney. Years later she revealed to my mom that my grandma and dad forced her to go there. I don't know how someone can be forced to get in a car and be driven to a train station everyday to go to school in Chicago. My sister dropped out after a year or two and went to Purdue University Calumet, which is where I am now. Now when my family got together for holidays and birthdays they didn't talk about how

successful my sister will be one day. They would talk in concern about what my sister is going to do with her life.

Purdue University Calumet

When I graduated from high school my sister was still at Purdue. I didn't really want to go to college since I wasn't naturally talented like my sister. I had to put in a lot of effort to just get B's in school. I applied to Purdue since I didn't know what else to do and got accepted. I also got a scholarship that paid for my tuition completely. The only expense my family had to pay for was my books for the first few semesters. My sister already wasted over a hundred thousand dollars of my parent's money in tuition and expenses in Chicago. They had to drive her everyday to and from the train station. They had to pay for her ticket everyday to and from Chicago. My sister never got her license and still doesn't know how to drive. I didn't want to put more stress on my parents since I saw what my sister did to them already. I got my license before I graduated high school and was lucky to get a scholarship.

At Purdue I had to drive my sister everyday to school even when I didn't have class. She was always running late in the morning and I had an eight o-clock class. She didn't realize that we had to cross three train tracks to get to school, if we got caught once I would be late. One morning when the roads were really slick from rain and ice she made a comment about my driving.

"Are you going to go through any more red lights on the way to school?" she asked me.

I felt the blood rush to my head. "Do you want to die? I can slam on my brakes and we'll go sliding into a tree."

"No. Maybe you should learn how to drive." I should learn how to drive? She didn't even have her license! Her little sister was giving her a ride to school.

"Maybe you should walk to school," I told her. We didn't talk the rest of the trip.

After a year of taxiing my sister to and from Purdue she decided she didn't want to be in northwest Indiana anymore and told my parents she wanted to go to the University of Wisconsin in River Falls. My parents couldn't figure out why, but I knew why. She met someone online who lived in that area and wanted to be with him. There's nothing wrong with meeting people online, but I knew this guy and he was a douche bag. I talked to him a few times and he told me how much he hated my sister because she was a self-centered bitch. I guess things have changed.

My dad ended up paying more tuition for my sister again. He paid for her room and board. Every time she wanted to come home he would drive a total of sixteen hours to make sure his daughter got what she wanted. She never offered him gas money or said thank you. He drove the entire time while she slept. When she did come home for Christmas my family would be interested in her schooling since she was now away from Indiana. They were all so interested.

Present years

Last summer was when my sister and I really fell apart. Her boyfriend was coming to stay with my family for the entire summer because his mom didn't want him in her house or something. That should be a clear enough sign for my parents to say no. My sister was working at a job she had gotten from a friend a few years ago. Whenever she had to be at work my mom or me would stop whatever we were doing and give her a ride. My mom would have to clock out of her own job some days just to take her eldest daughter to her minimum wage job. Sometimes when I had work my sister would want me to go in late so she could get a ride from me. Every time I gave her a ride her boyfriend would tag along. They wouldn't talk to me the entire time. She wouldn't say thank you. She wouldn't offer me gas money even though her job was about twenty miles away from our town. I stopped giving her rides.

My mom got my sister's boyfriend a job at the place she works. It wasn't a nice job. Just stocking and cleaning from four to eight on the weekdays. He said he was going to give the money to my parents as a way of showing his thanks for letting his stay here for the summer. He only wanted one day a week though. That's about thirty-five dollars a week. He only worked for three weeks and my parents never saw a check.

My sister's boyfriend then offered to clean around the house as a way of showing his thanks. Every day when I came home from work in the afternoon I would look around to see what was done in the house. Nothing. Every night when I came home from community service I would look around the house again to see if anything was done. Nothing. My parents stopped expecting anything from him.

Toward the end of the summer my parents and I were looking forward to my sister and her boyfriend leaving for Wisconsin. We would do really crappy things like go out to eat and not invite them. We would devour all of our dinner so we didn't have any leftovers. Sometimes we'd leave all day to the mall and not tell them where we were going. Every time my mom tried to talk to my sister her boyfriend would be right there. Whenever my dad would take my sister to work he would follow along. It was like he didn't trust my parents to be alone with my sister. My mom was upset that her first daughter didn't want to spend any time with her unless her boyfriend was there. I don't blame her.

The day before they left, my mom told me that my sister wanted to take Final Fantasy 8 with her back to Wisconsin. I told my mom that she never played Final Fantasy 8 so I didn't understand why she would want it. She didn't know either. This happened in our kitchen.

My sister came downstairs while my mom and I were talking. I asked her why she wanted the video game since she never showed any interest in it before.

She crossed her arms across her chest covering up her pajama's she was still wearing although it

was two in the afternoon. "Because it's my game," she said.

I hesitated and wished my sister still had braces so I could smash her face in, "I don't understand how it's your game if dad bought it for us when we were too young to even have a job?"

"Well, it's mine," she said as if that clarified anything I asked.

After talking turned into screaming between my sister and me, my mom got involved and took my side. My sister began yelling at both my mom and me over a game that she had never played, but it was my favorite game. I knew why she wanted the game, but my mom didn't. She wanted the game because her douche bag boyfriend wanted it. I eventually threw the game at her and told her to never ask me for anything anymore. I also told her that she wasn't my sister. Since the summer of 2009, I was pretty much an only child.

Once my parents dropped off my sister and her boyfriend to their new apartment they weren't offered to stay the night. My parents had to drive the entire 16 hours back to Indiana after they dropped off their first daughter. She didn't call much either once she was gone. Well, she didn't call at all. She messaged my mom a few times over the internet to ask for money. My sister also wanted her boyfriend to be put on our family plan so that he didn't have to pay for his cell phone bill. My dad agreed. I didn't understand why.

Two months later on Halloween, my sister messaged my mom again asking for more money. My mom finally stood up for herself for the past five years of her daughter being ungrateful for the things she has received. My mom told my sister how much money she wasted in Chicago for art school. My mom told my sister she was lucky to be able to go to China for a month. My mom told my sister she was even luckier to go to Colorado for an archaeology class. She explained to my sister how much money she spent at Purdue and now in Wisconsin. My sister didn't understand why my mom was hurt. Instead, my sister told my mom that she was three months pregnant. Douche bag's mom already knew and was planning the baby shower, but my sister wanted money. I wonder who my family will talk about this Christmas.

The End

Stages of Loss

Holly Lewis-Kincaid

1992

The air blew through my hair as I sped down the loose gravel driveway. Dust kicked up behind my bike as I pumped faster and faster. Sometimes I coasted down the hill, but not today. I wanted to go as fast as I could. As I approached the road I began to slow down, looking both ways there was nothing in sight. Without stopping I turned left onto the hot tar and gravel road. The summer sun had created hundreds of tar bubbles on the road that popped as I glided over them. I loved that sound. I begin to peddle faster again. Only about a mile until I reached my aunt's house.

My thoughts are racing faster than my bike. I had never seen my parents fight… Why couldn't they stay together? What would happen to my brother and me? Why did my dad leave? What did it really mean that they were getting divorced? Was this my fault? My hands were gripping the handle bars so tightly there was not much color left in them. I took a deep breath and let go. I stretched out my arms like birds wings. I was flying; flying away from the problem. Out here on the road it was just me and the wind…one on one. There really wasn't much I could do as a twelve year old about their divorce. All I wanted to do now was let go and fly away.

1994

After my mom and dad divorced they both remarried other people. This lead to a new chapter in my life that brought new blessings and challenges.

I was sitting in my bedroom reading. Out in the living room I heard screaming. I put my book down and tip toed over to my bedroom door. I slowly and quietly turned the lock. Then I pressed my ear against the thin wood. I heard my brother yelling. I heard commotion. I heard the boom of my step-father's voice. My mother was screaming and crying. My heart was beating very fast. My palms were getting sweaty. I contemplated my next move. Did I stay in hiding until it was over or did I try and defend my little brother?

I took a deep breath. I unlocked my door. I swung it open and bolted out. In front of me my step-father Don had my brother in his clutches. He was hitting him. My brother was asking him to stop in between sobs. I jumped on my step-father's back. I flung my arms around his neck. He let my brother Adam go. My goal had been achieved.

He and I tussled until I was able to break free. My mother was screaming and crying hysterically. All I could focus on was being safe. Making sure Adam was safe, that we would be ok.

Don chased me down the hall. I was almost to my room with the door closed when I felt his strong hand grip my arm. I swung with my other arm and

hit him in between his legs. He winced with pain and his grip grew dull. I broke free, slammed my door and locked it. I heard Don go to his room (which was next to mine). I could hear him and my mom fighting. He never hit my mom, just Adam and I. And after I hit him that night he never touched me again. But I always locked my door before I fell asleep at night. I never felt safe again.

2000

My grandmother had been fighting breast cancer off and on for eighteen years. When it came back this time it had spread to her bones and lymph nodes and she chose not to fight it anymore. She was tired of the chemo and radiation. She did not want to go through that again.

It had been a rainy year so far. The weather was appropriately gloomy, as my grandma lay dying in the hospital. The doctor said there was nothing else that could be done. She would have to be moved back the nursing home. After he left my mom and I held each other and cried. We were outside of grandma's room. We both wiped our tears and went back in. She sat in her bed frail and weak. A shell of the strong woman she had once been. The cancer had eaten away more than her body; her dignity seemed to be gone as well. Her eyes were sunken into her face and her smile seemed forced. I sat down near the bed and she reached out towards my hand. I moved closer and she gave it a squeeze. I kissed her on the cheek and got ready to go home for the night. Mom would stay this time. I had school in the morning.

It was my senior year of high school. I had missed so many days of class already to be by her side. But there was honestly nowhere else I wanted to be. Time with her was limited. After she was moved back to the nursing home our family rallied by her side. The nurses would come in to check on her. Her limbs began to grow cold. Her breathing grew labored. It was really only a matter of time. I wanted to go to her home nearby and take a bath, but I didn't want to leave her side. My mom convinced me leave, just for a little while. The way things were progressing it would be a while yet. Regrettably I kissed my grandma goodbye, for the last time, and was on my way.

While in the large claw foot bath tub at her house my cell phone rang. It was my mom. Grandma was gone. I hung up the phone and sat in shock in the soap and water. Even though she had been sick and I thought I was prepared for this, I wasn't. It hurt... a lot. I didn't cry at first. I needed to get dried off and meet mom at the funeral home. Arrangements needed to be made. A casket needed to be picked out. I walked through the rows of open caskets in the funeral home basement. There were so many choices and options. Silver, gold or wood on the outside? Satin, felt or other fabric on the inside? It seemed impossible to pick one, but my mom and I did.

The day of the funeral I got dressed. My boyfriend drove me to the funeral home. It was all a blur. I still hadn't really cried yet. I was still in

shock. After the service the family was allowed to have one more private viewing before proceeding to the cemetery for the burial. My mom and I were some of the last people to linger by her casket. That is when it hit me. Like a wall of emotion crumbling down, the tears fell. And fell. I heaved. I moaned. I think I screamed. I remember my boyfriend picking me up. I was sobbing. I didn't want to say goodbye. I wasn't ready. She was supposed to see me graduate from high school, get married, and see my children. But that would never come to pass. Life seemed so unfair. She was an amazing person. Why her? Why now? My family held me as I continued to grieve.

I stumbled to the bathroom in the funeral home. My knees were weak. I couldn't breathe. My heart was pounding. I struggled to close the heavy wooden door and lock it. I let out a deep sigh of relief and propped myself up against the back side of the door. I began to take short, shallow breaths when I felt it. My body fell to the cold floor and I lunged over the toilet. Hot vomit had splattered on my cheeks and I began to cough. For a moment I rested my head on the cold porcelain bowl, waiting to see if there was more to come. There couldn't be much, I hadn't eaten in days. I heard a knock at the bathroom door. It was my mother. She came in and picked me up. I leaned against the large marble sink. I splashed some cold water on my face. Yes, this was really happening. No it wasn't a dream. I dried my face and leaned into my mother for support. The funeral procession was waiting to leave down the highway. We left the funeral home and climbed into the front car with the rest of my family. It was time to go.

Arriving at the cemetery seemed surreal. Grandma and I had always come there to visit my grandpa's grave and put flowers on it. Now I would be doing that for her too.

My mind drifted back to all the times that we had shared together. I spent a lot of time with her when I was growing up. She had a dairy farm in Northeastern Ohio. I rode horses, helped collect eggs from the chickens and rode miles on my bike. She taught me how to cook without using measuring cups and spoons. She had endless patience with me as I asked countless questions about every topic. She bought a set of children's encyclopedias for me to read. I loved the pictures and she would bring me a bowl of m&m candies to eat while I read. Losing my grandma broke my heart.

As an adult there are so many times when I wish I could use her wisdom, when I wanted to hear her voice. It seemed so hard to let go.

2006

As my life moved on my grief faded and I began to accept the loss of my grandmother. But at I missed her the most during a time in my life when I could have used some wisdom and advice, after I was married. Life was very different than I thought it would be.

I woke up in a stupor. I blinked to clear my eyes. I looked at the snoring man lying beside me with disgust. Did I really marry him? I rolled over

and stared at the wall. What happened to the woman who wanted to become a lawyer? Who worked at least 40 hours a week at the largest law firm in the city? Where had she gone?

I threw off the covers and shuffled to the bathroom. I looked at myself in the mirror. Somehow I had gained 20 pounds since I got married. Ugh. Could be all the mindless eating. It was the only thing that really brought me any pleasure. I could always count on it to make me feel better. I turned on the shower to warm it up. Slowly steam began to the fill the small room. I sat down in front of t the radiator. It was warm there.

I logistically knew how I ended up in southern Tennessee, ten hours away from my family and hometown in Northeastern Ohio, but yet it continued to catch me off guard. I had left my job, my education, my friends and family, all to marry this man that seemed to irritate me more every day. The water was finally ready and climbed into the shower. Hot water pelted my body and warmed me to the core. I sat down in the tub and let the spray fall upon me. I wish somebody would have told me there was no happily ever after.

2009

I never thought I would be married at twenty-three and divorced by twenty-six. But I was. I had met Dan at church when I was twenty-two. He was older than me, secure in his job and ready to settle down. I had longed for the family life that my broken home had failed to provide.

We were married in Ohio with our families and his job transferred us to Southern Tennessee. I had a hard time adjusting to such a rural and isolated atmosphere. We tried to have a child but had no luck. I felt like a failure and became very depressed. I decided to go back to college and also got a part-time job. This helped tremendously.

Making new friends and meeting new people made a world of difference. But I still missed my family in Ohio. My husband received a very lucrative job offer in Chicago. We would be crazy not to accept it. We did and moved to the Chicagoland area. It didn't take us long to realize that they offered him all that money because HE WOULD NEED IT! The cost of living was enormous! We moved from Downers Grove, IL to Northwest Indiana where home prices and taxes were lower. I believe this move and the fact that we were not able to have a child added tremendous stress to the marriage. We didn't fight a lot. We just began to feel like roommates more than husband and wife. The final straw in our marriage proved to be Oxford.

I earned an academic scholarship to cover a summer studying at St. Edmund Hall, part of Oxford University in England. This required me to be gone for a considerable amount of time. I had made up my mind I was going no matter what. I had worked hard for this. It wasn't that he didn't want me to go, but he had concerns. I filed the divorce papers before I left. The divorce was final 6 months later.

Letting go of my marriage was been very

hard. I still loved my ex-husband. He still is one of my best friends. But I don't know if I could ever be married again. I have been engaged twice since the divorce. Both times I called it off. I just couldn't go through with it. I also recently unexpectedly became pregnant. What a blessing! I was shocked but thrilled. I had always wanted children. It might not be the best time but I felt ready. Unfortunately I experienced a miscarriage.

The loss of this child devastated me. I felt like a total failure. I had no husband, no children and most of my friends and family lived in Ohio. I am still recovering from this loss. I took a temporary second job to distract me from dwelling on what has taken place. After completing this semester I am planning to move back to Ohio. Back to where I started, where my support system is. Maybe then I will have a better chance of letting go and moving on.

The End

Photo by Brittaney Robison

Writers Unblocked

The best student creative writing
2009-2010

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